THE COURTING OF SUSIE BROWN

by the same author

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JACKPOT

TOBACCO ROAD

TRAGIC GROUND

TROUBLE IN JULY

GOD'S LITTLE ACRE

THE SURE HAND OF GOD

A HOUSE IN THE UPLANDS

TOBACCO ROAD (THE PLAY)

THIS VERY EARTH

JOURNEYMAN

GEORGIA BOY

EPISODE IN PALMETTO

PLACE CALLED ESTHERVILLE

A LAMP FOR NIGHTFALL

ERSKINE CALDWELL

THE COURTING OF SUSIE BROWN

and other stories

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THE COURTING OF SUSIE BROWN

HALF an hour after the sun went down on the far side of the Mississippi, Sampson Jones was hurrying along the dusty road to Elbow Creek, where Susie Brown lived all alone in her house behind the levee. Every once in a while he shifted the heavy shoe-box from one arm to the other, easing the burden he was carrying.

When he jogged over the last rise of ground before reaching the levee, he saw the flickering light in Susie's window, and the sight that met his eyes made him hurry faster than ever.

Susie was inside her house, putting away the supper dishes. She was singing a little and brushing away the miller moths that swarmed around the light in the room.

Sampson rattled the rusty latch on the gate and hitched up his pants. Susie had never looked so good to him before.

'You look sweeter than a suck of sugar, baby,' he shouted to her through the open window.

Susie spun round on her heels. The tin pan she was drying sailed out of her hands and clattered against the cook-stove.

'What you want here again, Sampson Jones?' she cried, startled out of her wits. 'What you doing down here off the high land?'

She had to stop and fan herself before she could get her breath back.

'You done found that out the first time, honey,' he said, lifting the heavy shoe-box and laying it before her eyes on the window-sill. 'Now why don't you just give up? Ain't no use spoiling it by playing you don't know why I come.'

Susie studied the shoe-box, wondering what it could hold. The sight of it made her hesitate. The last three times Sampson had come to court her, he had not brought her a single thing.

'I ain't got no time to waste on no sorry, measly-weight, trifling man,' she said finally, turning her back on the shoe-box.

'My trifling days is all over, honey,' he said quickly. 'I ain't trifling around no more.'

Susie swung the dish towel on the line behind the cook-stove and stole a quick glance to herself in the mirror over the shelf. Then she moved slowly across the room, watching Sampson and his shoe-box suspiciously.

'When I get set and ready for a man, I'm going to get me a good one,' she said, inspecting him disdainfully. 'I ain't aiming to waste my good self on no short-weight ploughboy.'

Sampson grinned confidently at the scowling, brown-skinned girl.

'Baby,' he said, 'what do you reckon I done?'

'What?' she asked, her interest mounting.

'I weighed myself at exactly two hundred and ten pounds just a little while ago previously.'

He started to swing his legs through the window opening, but Susie gave him a shove that sent him dropping to the ground.

'I weigh my men on my own scales,' Susie said stiffly. 'I wouldn't take your weighing in any quicker than I would the next one who comes bragging along.'

'What makes you think I'm lying about myself to you,

honey?' he asked unhappily. 'Why you crave to go and talk like that?'

'Because you don't weigh nowhere near two hundred pounds, that's why,' she said sharply. 'I done made up my mind over the kind of man I want when I get myself ready to want him, and you ain't the one I'm thinking about. It don't make no difference at all what you brings me in a shoe-box, neither.' She paused for a moment, getting her breath. 'You hear what I say, Sampson Jones?'

'I hear you, honey,' he said. 'But it would make me downright awful sad if you was to make a bad mistake for yourself.'

Susie leaned out the window and stared down at the box under his arm.

'Maybe if you was to find out what I brung you,' he said, 'you'd swing around to the other kind of talk. I sure has got a pretty thing for you, honey. I brung it all the way from Mr. Bob Bell's store at the big crossroads.'

Susie glanced at the box, and then she straightened up and looked at Sampson all over from head to toe. The white shoe-box was tied tightly with heavy yellow twine. It gleamed enticingly before her eyes in the moonlight, only an arm's length away.

'How much you say you really sure enough weigh?' she asked, continuing to look at him up and down.

'I done told you two-hundred-ten, honey,' he said hopefully. 'Why you think I ain't telling you the whole lawful truth?'

Sampson watched her for a while, wondering if she were going to believe him this time. He had been coming down from the high land to see her for six months, trying his best every minute of the time he was there to court her into marrying him. Sometimes he succeeded in getting his arms

around her for a little while, hugging her some round the waist and a little round the neck, but usually she kept him at a distance by making him stay outside on the ground while she sat on the porch, talking to him through the window.

No matter how well he argued with her, Susie had always said that the man she was going to take up with had to weigh two hundred pounds or better. Sampson had never weighed more than a hundred and sixty pounds in his whole life until he began courting her. Now he had managed to put on thirty additional pounds in six months' time after eating all the beans and fat pork he could put his hands on. But during the past month he had discovered that, no matter how much he ate, he was not able to increase his weight a single pound over one hundred and ninety. And to make matters worse, his worry over that was causing him to lose weight every day. He had become desperate.

While he was standing there on the ground outside her window, Susie had moved away. Sampson hurried around to the front of the house. Susie had seated herself on the rocker on the porch, and she was sitting there placidly fanning her face.

Sampson set one foot on the bottom step hopefully.

'Don't you dare come one single more inch, Sampson Jones!' Susie said sharply. 'I ain't satisfied in my mind with the weighing you said you done to yourself.'

Sampson patted his expanded stomach and slapped his heavy thighs with his great brown hands.

'Woman,' he said crossly, 'you sure is one aggravating creature. Here I is with all this man-sized weight on my frame, and you act like you don't even see it at all. What's the matter with you, anyhow?'

He slammed the shoe-box on the second step from the

bottom, threw out his chest and thrust out his arms to show his bulging muscles.

'Why don't you get some scales and let me weigh you then, if you're all that sure?' she said. 'You ain't scared to let me weigh you in, is you?'

Sampson stopped and thought it over carefully. After a while, he looked up at Susie.

'I'd be tickled to have you weigh me in, Susie,' he said, 'only I ain't got no scales to do it on. Has you?'

Before she could reply, he stooped down quickly and picked up the heavy shoe-box.

'Drop that box, Sampson Jones!' she said sharply. 'I know what you're up to. You're trying to trick me with that heavy box you've got there.'

'No, I ain't, Susie,' he said, startled. Sheepishly he put the box down on the step. 'What makes you think a sorry thing like that about me?'

'Well,' Susie said, rocking some more, 'if you ain't lying in your talk, maybe you'll weigh in on my stillyerd.'

Sampson's face fell. 'Has you got a stillyerd here, Susie, sure enough?'

Susie stood up. 'You stand right where you is now, and I'll bring it,' she told him. 'I'm getting all tired out from hearing all your boasting. The weighing-in will settle it.' She moved toward the door. 'That is, if you ain't scared to show me your true weight.'

'I ain't scared one bit, Susie,' he said fearfully.

When she had gone out of sight into the house, Sampson ran out into the yard and began picking up all the rocks and stones he could put his hands on. He filled both hip pockets with the largest ones, and then began scooping up fistfuls of gravel and filling all his other pockets. Susie still had not returned, and so he hastily untied his shoes and stuffed them with all the sand he could get into them. He

straightened up, trembling all over, when he heard Susie come toward him through the house. He was certain he had not succeeded in loading himself with the necessary ten pounds of stone, sand, and gravel. At the last moment, he found another stone and put it into his mouth.

Susie brought the weighing steelyard to the porch and hung it on a rafter. Then she looked around for Sampson.

Sampson went up the steps carrying the heavy shoe-box under one arm. He thrust his other arm through the loop of rope dangling from the steelyard.

'Set the box on the floor,' she ordered firmly.

He looked at her, pleadingly for a few moments, but recognizing the determined expression on Susie's face, he dropped it.

'I been ploughing hard all day in the cotton field, from sunrise to sunset,' he began. 'I wouldn't be taken back at all if I'd lost a heap of pounds, Susie.'

'We'll see,' she said harshly. 'Hitch yourself up on that stillyerd.'

Sampson thrust his arm through the loop and painfully swung himself clear of the floor. While he hung there, knowing his fate was in the balance, Susie stepped over and slid the weighing ball along the steel arm.

He tried to twist his head back in order to watch the weighing, but he was in such a cramped position that it was impossible for him to see anything overhead. He gave up and hung there by one arm, praying with every breath.

By the time Susie had satisfied herself that her weighing of him was accurate, Sampson was dizzy from strain and worry. He barely knew what he was doing when he heard Susie's voice tell him to set himself on his feet.

When his feet touched the floor, his knees began to sag, and he found himself staggering across the porch. He reached the wall and dug his fingernails into the rough

weatherboarding in an effort to find support Susie still had not said anything since she told him to get down from the steelyard, and he was too weak to ask her anything about it.

Presently he felt Susie's arms around his neck. The next moment he felt himself sliding downward to the floor.

When he regained his senses, Susie was kneeling beside him, hugging him with all her might. He struggled free of her grip and got his breath back. The stone he had been holding in his mouth was gone. He could not tell whether it had fallen out or whether he had swallowed it. He was uneasy.

'Honey,' Susie was saying to him, 'I sure am happy about the big way you weighed in. Looks like you'd have done it for me sooner, instead of waiting all this long time.'

'How much did I weigh in at, Susie?' he asked.

'Honey, you weighed exactly two hundred and fifteen pounds,' she said delightedly. 'And only a little while ago you said it was only two-ten. My, oh, my!'

Sampson closed his eyes.

When he looked up again, he saw Susie busily opening the heavy shoe-box. She untied the string and took off the lid. Then she lifted out the ten-pound sadiron he had brought her with the hope that when he weighed for her he would be able to keep the box under his arm.

'It's the finest present I ever had in all my life, honey,' she said sweetly, running the palm of her hand over the smooth surface.

She gazed at him admiringly.

While he waited for her to speak again, he glanced quickly up into her face, wondering how he was going to be able to rid himself of twenty-five pounds of stone before she discovered it on him.

SUMMER ACCIDENT

IT was a hot night, and the heat was singing.

I knew something was going to happen, and I should have had the sense to stay at home. But that was the trouble. I let myself be talked into it. I went down to the Square and met Stumpy and Verne at seven o'clock.

Almost everyone was sitting on his front porch when I walked down the street, and I was certain I could hear people saying something about me. 'There goes Herbert downtown again tonight,' they were saying. 'One of these days those boys are going to get into trouble so deep they'll never get out to see daylight again.' I walked faster.

When I reached the Square, Stumpy was sitting on the kerb in front of the bank. He got up and stretched.

'Where's Verne?' he asked. 'Isn't he coming like he said he would?'

'He said he'd be here as soon as he finished eating supper. I haven't seen him since he went home.'

'We'll wait a little while,' Stumpy said. 'But we can't wait all night. Weathers will be leaving soon.'

'Let's wait until some other time, Stumpy. I don't want to get into trouble, and I can't help feeling that something's going to happen. I just know it is. Let's go home.'

'You're just like all the rest of them, Herb,' Stumpy said. 'If I was troubled with cold feet, I'd cut them off. I wouldn't go around complaining about them all the time.'

I did not know what to say. Stumpy wasn't afraid of anything, as far as I knew, and he had a way of making me feel ashamed of myself for being afraid. But I couldn't help it that time. I knew something was going to happen. I could feel it deep down inside of me.

Just then Verne came up behind us, and all three of us turned and walked slowly up Maple Street. Verne was the one who had started it. He had talked Stumpy into helping him, and Stumpy had made me go along.

'Now is the time to get him,' Stumpy said. 'There's never going to be a better time than this.'

'I'm ready,' Verne said, his lower jaw trembling a little. 'Where is he?'

'Wait a minute,' Stumpy said. 'Now, here is what we'll do. I'll creep up behind him and grab him around the neck. He's round there in the parking lot beside the bottling plant sitting in his cut-down. Verne, you come right behind me, and as soon as I've got a good grip around his neck, you get his feet and hold on for all you're worth. We'll hold him while Herb cranks up the cut-down and drives out of the lot toward the country. It'll be easy to do, because once I get a good grip around his neck, there's no way for him to get loose. Look, this will keep him quiet after we get him out of town.'

He pulled out the revolver he had told us about that afternoon. It was pearl-handled and it was a five-shooter. The barrel, trigger, and hammer were so rusty that the whole gun looked as if it had been painted red. Stumpy had said the gun was fifteen years old, and it looked as if it had been buried in soggy ground during all that time.

The rust dropped off in scales every time Stumpy turned it over in his hands.

Stumpy went ahead and Verne and I followed at his heels. Before we realized it, Stumpy had grabbed Weathers, and a moment later he was shouting for Verne to grab his feet. I cranked up Weathers's cut-down and turned it round. We were out of the lot and on Maple Street speeding toward the country before much more than a minute had passed. During all the time we were going up Maple Street, Weathers was kicking and grunting. I knew that Stumpy and Verne could hold him if anyone could, but I wished then, more than ever, that we had left Weathers alone. I knew something was going to happen before the night was over.

Two miles out of town, Stumpy shouted at me. The exhaust was disconnected and the cut-down was making so much noise that I could not understand a word he said. I slowed down.

'Turn off the road towards Dean's Pond,' Stumpy said.

I turned into the lane, and we bumped over the rough road for half a mile. There was not a light to be seen anywhere. When we reached the pond, I shut off the motor and switched off the lights.

'Why don't you stay away from here?' I heard Verne ask Weathers.

'Who's going to make me?' Weathers said.

'I'll make you—won't I, Stumpy?'

'Shut up, Verne,' Stumpy said. 'You'll make him mad in a minute. Shut up.'

'Well, he came up to the house to see my sister, didn't he?'

'You ought not to have a sister, and he wouldn't have bothered her. Look at me. I haven't got a sister. That's why he never steps on my toes.'

While they were talking and arguing, I sat down on the running board and looked out across the pond. I could hear water spilling over a dam, but I could not see a thing. Every minute I stayed there, I became more certain that something was about to happen. I knew it was.

Stumpy and Verne were the ones who wanted to beat up Weathers. I never had wanted to, but they had argued me into helping them, and I had said I would. They did not like Weathers because he had been coming to town since early in the spring and getting dates with every girl he saw. He would drive into town early in the afternoon and hang around the Square, waiting for a chance to make a date for the night. When a girl walked past him, he would turn and look at her. If he liked the way she looked, he would whistle and catch up with her. Most of the girls had given him dates; a few of them had allowed him to see them several times.

Weathers had been beaten up, kicked out of houses, and shot at more times than anyone could remember, but nothing like that had ever stopped him from coming back to town the next time he wanted a date. Whenever he came to town, he boasted that there was not a girl in the whole county worth looking at, if she hadn't had a date with him. That was what had made Stumpy and Verne so angry. He had a date with Dolly Bennett, and tied her to the sofa in the parlour. Dolly's father shot at him as he was jumping through the window, but he missed hitting Weathers. After that, Stumpy and Verne said they were going to beat him up. Before they did anything about it, though, Weathers went to see Verne's sister. As soon as Stumpy found out about it, he said he had seen enough of Weathers loafing in the Square, wearing his orange-striped shirt and smoking a long, brown cigar, while he waited for a girl to come along and take up with her.

They had made up their minds after that to catch Weathers and beat him up.

Stumpy and Verne were still arguing, with Weathers butting in whenever he had a chance. I got up and walked round to the other side of the cut-down where I couldn't hear the water.

'Papa said he'd shoot the balls off you, if you ever come back to our house again,' Verne told Weathers.

'Hell, I'm not scared of your old man, or anybody's old man,' Weathers said. 'Bring him out here, if you want to see me hammer him down to size.'

'Shut up, Verne,' Stumpy said, 'or else come up here and hold him a while. I'm tired doing all the holding while you sapsuckers do nothing but talk.'

'Hell, you'd be mad, too, if he came to see your sister and threw her down on the floor.'

'I haven't got a sister,' Stumpy said, 'so cut out all the talk and come up here and do your share of holding him for a while.'

'He went into the parlour with her and locked the door and threw the key out the window. Then he took out his knife and split her drawers off. When Papa broke in, he had her naked down on the floor. He didn't even get up and run, and Papa had to beat him off her with a chair.'

'I wish you sapsuckers would cut out the arguing,' Stumpy said. 'I'm going to turn him loose in a minute if you don't. I don't care what he did to your sister. Shut up.'

'What did you bring him out here for, then?'

'I brought him out here to beat up,' Stumpy said, 'but if you don't shut up, I'm going to turn him loose and let him beat you up. I'm tired of listening to you.'

'Papa had to take her to a doctor the next morning,' Verne said. 'The doctor said Papa chased Weathers off just in time.'

'Shut up, you sapsucker,' Stumpy said.

Verne called me.

'Reach in Stumpy's pocket and hand me that gun, Herb,' he said. 'There's no sense in holding Weathers like this when all we have to do is to point Stumpy's gun at him and make him stand still.'

I went round to the side where Stumpy was and put my hand on the rusty barrel. It was like picking up a handful of sand; the rust scaled off and I had trouble in holding the barrel.

'No, you don't!' Stumpy said, hitting me with his knee. 'I'm the only one who handles that gun. Get away.'

'Get it, Herb,' Verne said. 'Go ahead and get it. Don't pay any attention to Stumpy.'

'I wish you sapsuckers would hurry and get tired of playing,' Weathers said. 'I've got a date for eight o'clock.'

'Verne wants the gun, Stumpy,' I said, reaching for it again.

'Grab it, Herb,' Verne said. 'Don't be scared of Stumpy. He can't turn Weathers loose.'

I reached around Stumpy's back and caught the barrel again and held on to it with all my might. Stumpy tried to push me away, and he tried to kick me with his knee, but I held the barrel, and slowly I could feel it coming out of his pocket. Just when I thought I had it, Stumpy released Weathers and turned around to take the gun away from me. Verne made a dive for it, too. All three of us twisted and pulled, and fell in a heap on top of Weathers. He yelled when we fell on him.

I never knew how it happened, but the first thing I knew there was an explosion like a stick of dynamite under a tin can. There was a blinding flash of white light, a choking cloud of black smoke, and a moment later somebody was yelling as if he was being killed.

All of us were too stunned to move after the shot was fired, and we lay there on top of Weathers, trying to think what had happened. I could not feel the gun in my hand, but I was certain I had my fingers gripped round it the moment when the shot was fired.

'Get up, Herb,' Stumpy said. 'You're sitting on my foot.'

I crawled away from them, and Verne came behind me. Stumpy got up holding his hand. It was red with blood.

'What happened?' I said.

Verne turned around and looked at Weathers. He jumped to his feet a second later, clutching at Stumpy.

'Look at him!' Verne shouted. 'Stumpy, look at him!'

We ran over to where Weathers lay. There was a stream of blood coming from his chest, seeping through the orange-striped shirt that Stumpy hated so much.

Verne got down beside him.

'I didn't do it, Weathers,' he said. 'Honest to God, Weathers, I didn't do it! It wasn't me, Weathers. I swear it wasn't me, Weathers."

'Shut up, Verne,' Stumpy said. 'Somebody did it.'

'I didn't do it—I swear I didn't do it, Weathers!' Verne said.

'Shut up, Verne,' Stumpy said.

I crawled over on my hands and knees to where Weathers lay. I could see his eyes open for a moment, and then slowly close.

Stumpy walked around to the other side of him and sat down on the ground. I could still hear water somewhere, but I could not see it.

'What happened?' Weathers asked, his eyes still closed.

Nobody answered.

Verne began looking in the grass for the revolver. It was getting dark, but the white and orange and scarlet-red of Weathers's shirt could be seen at any distance.

'It shot me,' Weathers said.

Stumpy sat up on his knees, looking down into Weathers's face. Stumpy still did not say anything.

Verne found the revolver. He picked it up, holding it at arm's length, and walked towards the pond. He was gone for nearly five minutes. When he came back, the revolver was not in his hands. We sat and stared at each other.

Finally, Stumpy got to his feet. Weathers's eyes had opened again, but they had remained open this time.

Verne waited beside Weathers until Stumpy and I had walked to the other side of the cut-down. A little later he came over to where we were. Without any of us speaking of it, we started walking back to town.

Stumpy started out walking fast.

'We didn't have any business bothering Weathers,' Verne said. 'He wouldn't be dead if we hadn't brought him out here to beat up. It's our fault. We should have let him alone. He wasn't hurting anybody.'

'Shut up,' Stumpy said, walking ahead.

'I never heard of him really hurting a girl, anyway. He didn't mean to do any harm to any of them, not even Dolly Bennett or my sister.'

'Shut up,' Stumpy said, walking faster.

'He would be alive now, if we had minded our own business, instead of trying to butt into his. God knows what will happen to us now. Maybe all of us will be electrocuted. That's what they'll do to us for killing him.'

I ran and caught up with Stumpy and tried to keep up with him. He was walking faster and faster.

The perspiration began to run down my face, wetting the collar of my shirt. The heat was singing.

'Weathers wasn't doing anybody any harm,' Verne said. 'And maybe the girls didn't mind it much, because they always gave him dates when he asked for them. Maybe

they even liked him, and wanted him to come around. He had a date with some girl for tonight, too. We ought to have let him alone, because they all acted like they were tickled to have him date them. I never heard any of them say she didn't want Weathers to come to see her. Even my sister never said that, not even after he got her naked in the parlour that time.'

'Shut up, Verne,' Stumpy said, walking faster. 'God damn it, shut up!'

THE SICK HORSE

BENTON came running round the corner of the house yelling for me to come quick. I didn't have a chance to ask him then what the trouble was, but when we got to the barn, I heard Benton saying that something was the matter with King. I had been looking for that, and I wasn't a bit surprised. If a man ever got the worst end of a bargain, I sure thought it was Benton the Friday before, when he swapped Jim Dandy for King and a durn rusty mowing machine.

All I could think of then was that maybe the best thing for the new horse was a stiff dose of medicine. I didn't have a chance to mention that to Benton until after we got inside and had opened the stall door.

Benton was blocking the door and I couldn't see the horse right away.

'Is he down yet, Benton?' I said, pushing past him.

Benton jumped aside as if somebody had jabbed him in the ribs.

'He don't have to get down for me to know he's sick, Clyde,' he said. He put his hand on King's bony rump and stared at the scrawny tail. 'I should have had the sense to have found out before I traded if he was taken

I went on about finishing up my work and didn't have a chance to see Benton again until late in the afternoon. I had heard one car stop in front of the house, but whoever it was got headed off by Benton at the front gate and he didn't get a chance to come to the barn where the sick horse was.

About five o'clock I walked around to the front of the barn and sat down to wait for Benton to come out. I knew he would be there before feeding time to look at King, and I did not want to miss seeing if the medicine had helped any. I couldn't get it out of my head all that time about trading Jim Dandy for King and the rusty mower. It was a fool trade, if there ever was one, and I couldn't figure out what had made Benton go and do it. Jim Dandy was just about the finest horse a man could hope to own. He was a good height and just about perfect in weight, and he had the finest mane and tail I ever expect to see again on a horse.

I'd always rubbed him down twice a day, and I had even got so I would rather do that than take a day off and go to town. I'd curry him and brush him until his sides were as shiny as new paint. The cold weather always ruffled up his hide, and when I started in, it would be as fuzzy as a kitten's. By the time I had finished, he looked like he'd just stepped out of the show-ring with a blue ribbon. Then I'd start on his tail and mane and spend another hour working over that. I'd comb him carefully first, and then I'd begin brushing them. His mane was as silky and smooth as a young girl's hair, and those waves would come out and shine just like they had been put there with a curling iron.

But it was his tail that showed up the wavy streaks so well. His tail reached all the way down to the ground, and after you'd worked over it three-quarters of an hour and

stood back to let the sunshine play on it, it looked exactly like a frozen lake that had locked up with the frost when the wind was high. You can see the same thing in November before the snow falls by standing on a hilltop somewhere and looking down a mile or two away and see one of those sheets with the waves locked up in the ice. I tell you, there's not a prettier sight anywhere than that, and that's exactly how the curly waves in Jim Dandy's mane and tail looked.

I don't know how long I'd been sitting there in the sun thinking about Jim Dandy when Benton opened the house door and came down toward the barn. Just then a car drove up, but Benton was too busy thinking about something else to hear it; and two men got out and came on down toward the barn where we were.

Benton had his head down, and I couldn't motion to him till he got to the barn door, and then it was too late. Henry Trask and Fred Welch were too close to the barn by then to head off. I couldn't do a thing but just stand there and pray that they would never get inside to see King.

'Well,' Benton said, 'I guess we'd better go take a look.'

It wasn't till then that he heard Henry and Fred behind him. Benton jumped like he was trying to get out of his skin.

'I heard you've got a new horse, Benton,' Henry said. 'Trying to keep it a secret? Tell Clyde to lead him out and let us get a look at him. And don't go trying to tell me he's a better horse than Jim Dandy, Benton.'

Benton didn't know what to say then. He knew there was no way to get Henry and Fred away before they saw the horse. They had already got to the door, and nothing in the world could stop them then. They'd come eight miles to take a look at King.

'Henry,' Benton said, 'I wish you and Fred hadn't come here today.'

'Why?' Fred asked. 'What's the trouble, Benton? Your wife ailing or something?'

'My horse is sick,' Benton said, reaching out for the side of the barn to find support. Nobody could have looked more sick than Benton did right then, but somehow both Henry and Fred failed to notice it.

'That's all right, Benton,' Henry said. 'You won't have to lead him out. We'll go inside and look at him in the stall.'

We all walked inside and went down through the harness room and opened the door to the stall. Benton stood back. He acted like he never wanted to look at King again. Anyway, he opened the door and stepped back instead of leading the way inside as he usually did when he was proud to show the horse he owned.

'There's no horse in here, Benton,' Henry said, coming back through the door. 'Is this a joke or something? The stall's as empty as a Baptist church at blueberrying time.'

Both me and Benton stepped to the door and looked inside. Sure enough, King wasn't there. We didn't know what to think.

'He was there right after noontime,' Benton said excitedly, 'because me and Clyde came in here and gave him a gunful of castor oil, didn't we, Clyde?'

'Sure as I've got legs to stand on,' I said. 'And he couldn't have got out, because this door has been latched all day long.'

We ran inside, Benton and me. Then we saw what had happened. The side of the stall next to the areaway had been kicked down. All but the two bottom boards had been smashed to pieces.

Henry and Fred were standing behind us.

'That's the quickest I ever saw a horse get well,' Benton said. 'Here I've been all day trying to keep people from coming in to see King, and here he goes and gets well and kicks the side of the stall down.'

Benton was all excited, thinking that King had turned out to be a fine-spirited horse, after all, in spite of his looks.

'Come on,' Benton said, leaping over the splintered boards. 'He's back in the areaway. I know he's not out, because all the doors stay locked.'

The four of us ran out into the areaway, where all the harnessing is done, but King wasn't anywhere in sight. The outside door was shut and latched just like Benton had said it was and just like I knew it was. But King wasn't in the areaway, either.

'Maybe he got into another stall or into the grain room,' Henry said.

We went down toward the other end of the barn.

'He couldn't have got into another stall,' Benton said, 'because the rest of the stalls are on the other side of the one he was in. There's no other way for him to go, that I can see. The grain-room door is shut tight.'

Just the same, to make sure, I opened it and looked round inside, but King wasn't there and hadn't been there.

It was the strangest thing I'd ever seen. I was stumped. Benton didn't know what to do next, either.

'What's that door lead into?' Henry said, walking to the door beyond the grain room.

'Shucks,' Benton said, 'there's no sense opening that door, because that's just a sort of privy me and Clyde use in the winter when we're working in the barn.'

Henry took a couple of steps, and stopped short round the corner of the grain-room.

'There's no sense in opening the door, all right,' Henry said. 'It's already open.'

The rest of us ran down so we could see what he was talking about.

Right then—well, I don't know what anybody said that. It was—I had to look three or four times myself before I knew what I was doing, and even then—sometimes I still can't believe what I saw. Benton—if Benton—but there's no use in trying to tell what Benton said. The whole thing——

We all finally got outside the barn someway. Benton sat down on a bench and looked off across the hills. Both Fred and Henry were laughing too much to talk sense any more. First they'd say something about Benton's new horse, and then they'd look at each other, and then they'd break out laughing all over again.

'Benton,' Henry said, after they had quieted down some, 'it was worth your losing a horse just to know that your stock is the smartest in the country, wasn't it? I've seen horses do smart things, but this is the first time I ever saw or heard of one being smart enough to go to the privy when he took sick.'

Benton got up.

'But King died in there, though,' he said. 'I've lost him, Henry."

'That's just it, Benton,' Fred said. 'Any horse that had enough sense to back in there and die on the bench proves that even when your horses are nothing to look at, they are still the smartest in the country.'

Benton could not see it in that light then. He was still worried to think that the tale would hurt his reputation as a horseman. Henry and Fred left soon afterward, still laughing like I knew they would be for the next four or five days, and I didn't see much of Benton till late in the evening.

At bedtime Benton came upstairs while I was undressing

pass the night. He walked across the room and back before he said anything.

'I wouldn't have had that to happen for anything in the world, Clyde,' he said. 'I'd a heap rather have a horse of mine drop dead in the show-ring—than that.'

'I don't know, Benton,' I said. 'It takes a smart animal to do a thing like that. Maybe King figured that he had to make up some way for his lack of looks.'

Benton came over to the table.

After a while he looked up at me. A change had come over his face.

'You're right, Clyde,' he said. 'It just goes to prove what I've felt ever since I was ten years old, when I started handling horses, and that is that there's no bad horses. Some of them have good looks, some have good sense, and the ones that don't have looks have the other, because all horses have some sense.'

'Well, King didn't have any looks, but he sure had horse sense,' I said.

Benton jumped to his feet.

'That's it, Clyde! Horse sense! I knew as well as I knew my name that that fellow I traded with thought he had stung me, and so did you and everybody else; but I could tell by watching King that day that he had what every horse worth his currycomb ought to have. By God, Clyde, King had horse sense!'

BACK ON THE ROAD

WHEN Mr. Sears kissed his wife good-bye at the train side in the Union Station, he had no more idea of going back on the road than he had of flying round the world in an aeroplane. Never for a moment in ten years' time had he regretted his decision to buy a seven-room house, to marry Mrs. Sears, and to accept the offer from the company to make him office manager.

'Good-bye, Mr. Sears,' his wife said, drying her eyes with the corners of her handkerchief as he boarded the St. Louis Express. 'Don't sleep in a draughty room, and be sure to ask the hotel to fix up a bottle of hot milk for you to drink before you go to bed.'

For the past ten years his wife had called him Mr. Sears. His name was Henry, but no one ever called him that any longer. Ever since the day he came in off the road and settled down as office manager he had been Mr. Sears. During the fifteen or sixteen years he had spent on the road as sales representative for the company, calling on the trade in the South-West, people everywhere had called him Henry. Even Mrs. Sears had called him Henry then. But when he left the road and became office manager, she thought it was more dignified to address him in public and in private as Mr. Sears.

'Good-bye,' Mr. Sears said, pausing for a moment in the vestibule. 'I'll be back tomorrow evening for dinner. The train gets in at seven-twenty.'

His wife turned her handkerchief round until she found an unused corner, and dried a tear before going back through the station to the street.

Mr. Sears had been called into the president's office the day before and instructed to run up to St. Louis and attend to an important matter for the company. The home office and plant in Memphis, where Mr. Sears was office manager, was worried over the piling up of orders from the Missouri distributor in St. Louis. The orders for ploughs, hoes, rakes, pitchforks, cultivators, and miscellaneous farm implements were highly prized, and the company thought it best to send Mr. Sears up and have him explain that the delay in shipping was unavoidable, and that the orders would be filled and shipped by the end of the week.

The president had impressed upon Mr. Sears the importance of the mission, and had urged him to handle the matter with great delicacy and tact. Orders for anything, the president had told him, were worth fighting for during such times, and if their company could not fill them with reasonable promptness, there were dozens of other companies that could. As special representative of the company, Mr. Sears was to exert a calming influence over the St. Louis jobbers and to promise them that the orders would be filled and in transit by the end of the week. Having served the company faithfully for twenty-five years, the president said, he knew he could rely upon Mr. Sears to forestall the threatened cancellations and to smooth the way for future orders from Missouri.

It was late in the afternoon when Mr. Sears arrived in St. Louis, and he went directly to his hotel. His appointment

was set for ten o'clock the next morning, and he planned to devote the rest of the afternoon and a part of the evening to a study of the papers the president had given him before leaving Memphis. The papers themselves were of little importance; they were merely sheets of data that were to be laid before the St. Louis people to show that sales for the current quarter in the south-western territory, and in Missouri particularly, were 12½ per cent greater than were those of the corresponding quarter of the preceding year. Mr. Sears did not know exactly how the figures had been arrived at, as the past three salary cuts had been based on the decline of car-loadings, the president had explained at the time, but Mr. Sears was convinced that the figures as they stood were for the good of the company.

When Mr. Sears walked into the hotel, he had expected to see someone whom he knew. For fifteen years he had made St. Louis twice a month, stopping at the same hotel, and he had known everyone connected with the house. But during the ten years he had been off the road, everything had changed. The room clerks were new men, the bellboys were younger, the cashiers were behind grilled walls, and the lobby was filled with palm trees and lounging women. Mr. Sears called for the assistant manager, expecting to see at least one former friend in the strange place, but the new assistant manager bowed stiffly and assigned one of the sleek-haired clerks to place Mr. Sears in an outside tenth-floor room-and-shower. Stiffly, Mr. Sears rode up the elevator and was shown to his room. He tipped the boy a dime and slammed the door. He was glad he was off the road. He could not bear to think how he had been able to spend fifteen years of his life jumping from hotel to hotel, from train to train, with none of the comforts of home and without the companionship of a wife. He was glad he would be able to get back to Memphis the

next evening in time for dinner. Mrs. Sears was expecting him at seven-twenty.

Mr. Sears took off his coat, put it on a hanger in the closet, unbuttoned his vest, and got out his briefcase. He spread the president's papers on the writing desk and filled his pipe.

After an hour spent in looking out the window, he stood up and put the unread papers back into the case, and got ready to go down to the lobby. He thought he would go down there and sit in a quiet place until dinner. The room was uninviting and the sooty jungle of chimney-pots on the roofs below somehow reminded him of Mrs. Sears's flower garden. Fifteen years of living in hotel rooms was all he wished of it, he said to himself; a seven-room house, a kind and devoted wife, and comfortable overstuffed furniture soon show a man how empty and tragic life can be for the commercial traveller. He thought that again, it sounded so good. A wife, a seven-room house, and overstuffed furniture! What does the road have to offer now! He chuckled to himself as he washed his hands and dried them on a towel with too much starch in it. He hoped the president would not wish to send him to St. Louis again any time soon. Nor to Dallas, New Orleans, Tulsa, or Kansas City. All of them were like St. Louis now. Once there had been a difference, in his younger days. But a wife and a home make a man realize that to live and work in one place is the best that life has to offer. Let the others travel all they wish to. Let them go to New York, San Francisco, anywhere; but give him Memphis for the rest of his days. Mr. Sears locked the door and went down to the lobby.

After dinner he came back to his room. It was not quite seven o'clock then, but the lobby was filled with a noisy crowd of shoe salesmen and evening-gowned women, and Mr. Sears wished to finish studying the president's papers

before he turned in for a good night's rest. He did not care to mingle with the crowd downstairs and undoubtedly be mistaken for one of them. He was not a commercial traveller; he was an office manager.

First of all, though, he decided to take a shower. He undressed hurriedly, throwing his clothes over the chairs, and turned on the water. He was busily engaged for a long time tempering the shower to suit his taste. He liked his showers just so—there was a certain temperature that suited him to perfection, and the delay in adjusting the hot and cold streams was worth the time and trouble. The moment when it was ready, he jumped into the spray of water, closing his eyes contentedly, and pretending that he was in his own house, with Mrs. Sears in the kitchen preparing dinner, and trying to forget that there was such a thing as south-western sales territory.

Suddenly, in the midst of his shower, he heard an insistent knocking on the outside door. He stuck his head out from the spray and listened a moment. The knocking was loud and impatient. Mr. Sears stuck his head back into the spray of water smiling broadly to himself. He remembered how it had been when he was on the road. There had been quick knockings on doors in Dallas, Kansas City, Fort Worth—well, nearly everywhere he went in those days. Now he paid no attention to such a thing. He was not on the road now. He lived in Memphis and he was married to Mrs. Sears. Drummers were forever making fools of themselves in one way or another, he said to himself. A settled business man like himself could not afford to take notice of such things.

But the knocking continued. It grew louder; it became so loud that it could not possibly be ignored for any great length of time.

Mr. Sears stuck his head out from the shower to listen

again. Someone was rapping angrily on the door —on his door. It was a mistake, he said, just as there had been mistakes in Houston, Shreveport, Kansas City. He had sent for no one and there was no possible reason why anyone in St. Louis should wish to see him. He knew no one, and he was certain nobody he had previously known would try to look him up. He listened to the knocking on the door, listened with both ears above the spray, wondering how long it would continue.

The rapping on his door kept up, becoming louder and more insistent than ever. Mr. Sears smiled to himself, glancing into the mirror to give himself a sly wink. He didn't care if he did, he said. He would go and take one little look. No harm could possibly come from that. He wished to see.

Reaching for a towel, Mr. Sears turned off the shower and stepped out on the bathmat. He tied the towel around his waist, pulling it down over his legs as far as it would go.

He unlocked the door and opened it until there was a crack an inch wide he could see through. He took one look and shut the door as quickly as he could. The automatic lock behaved as though it would never bolt the door.

When he was certain that the door was securely locked, Mr. Sears took a deep breath and looked around him wild-eyed. He had not expected to see what he did. There was a young woman standing out there without a coat or cloak of any kind and, besides, she was wearing a slanting little red hat over her left ear. He had not expected that. It was all a mistake, he said to himself. It was a genuine mistake. The woman was knocking on the wrong door. She should go to some other door and knock. She was trying to enter the wrong room.

Before he could decide what to do about it, the knocking

began again, louder and more determined than ever. Mr. Sears did not know what in the world to do. He stood looking down at himself for a moment, wondering how on earth he was ever going to get her away from his door.

'Open the door!' the woman said. 'Open the door this minute!'

That, thought Mr. Sears, was extraordinary. He had never seen or heard of anything like it before in all his life, not even during his fifteen years on the road in the South-West.

'Do you hear me!' she cried. 'Open the door!'

'What do you want in here?' he asked hastily.

'I want to come in! Open the door!'

'But I don't want you in here,' Mr. Sears said. 'You mustn't come in. I can't allow you to come in.'

'Open the door!' she said, raising her voice louder than ever. 'Let me in! Open the door this minute!'

Mr. Sears was so nervous and upset by then that he could not stand without holding on to something. He leaned against the wall, trying to think of the proper course of action under the circumstances. While he was trying to think of something to do, it occurred to him that it would never in the world do for the woman to make so much noise out there in the corridor. People would surely hear her, and then they would come to see what the trouble was. If that should happen, someone would be certain to call the police, and the police would come and arrest both of them on some pretext. Then he would be taken to court, along with the young woman, and the thing would get into the newspapers. The Memphis papers would print everything that was sent out by the news agencies. He could already see the headlines in the *Press-Scimitar* at home: MEMPHIS MAN AND ST. LOUIS WOMAN ARRESTED IN HOTEL!

Then below that would be his name in full and, no doubt, his picture. The woman's picture would be there, too. What would Mrs. Sears say!

'Open the door!' the strange woman cried again, striking the panels with her hands. 'Let me in!'

Mr. Sears promptly did the only thing he knew to do under the circumstances. He opened the door and ran for the bathroom.

The young woman ran into the room and began pulling out the bed and hurling chairs around as though she had suddenly lost something of great value. Mr. Sears was in the bathroom out of sight, but he knew by the sounds she made that she was searching for something she wished to find without delay. He knew she had no right to come into his room like that and tear things to pieces, and he believed he should stand up for his rights and order her out; but she was such an extraordinary young woman and he had never been in such an embarrassing position before in all his life, so he just stood there in the bathroom not knowing what in the world to do about it all.

Presently she ran into the bathroom where Mr. Sears was hiding, completely ignoring his desire for privacy. He was more surprised and embarrassed than ever, and the young woman with the slanting little red hat was panting with anger.

'What are you doing in my room?' she demanded, staring through Mr. Sears from head to toe with an impatient up-and-down movement of her head. 'Who let you in here?'

Mr. Sears drew the towel around his waist and reached for a second one. He decided that it was about time for him to stand up for his rights and put this impertinent and shameless young woman in her place.

'I engaged this room,' he said, his voice not so strong as

he wished it might have been. 'This is my room. What are you doing here?'

'Your room!' she cried, stamping her foot on the tiled floor. 'Your room! Why, I engaged this room myself yesterday! I slept here last night, and I worked here this morning. I told the clerk at the desk that I was not leaving until seven o'clock tonight.'

'Well,' Mr. Sears said, smiling faintly, 'then that's the whole trouble. The people down at the desk evidently thought you had checked out when they assigned the room to me.'

While Mr. Sears was explaining, the young woman was running back into the room, leaving him as suddenly as she had burst into his privacy a moment before. She found her two pieces of baggage and opened them to see if anything had been disturbed. Mr. Sears waited in the bathroom, glancing at himself in the mirror.

'Oh, I'm so sorry about all this,' she said.

'I am, too,' Mr. Sears said.

'I wouldn't have had it to happen for anything.'

'Neither would I.'

'Come here a minute,' she said.

Mr. Sears took a last hasty glance at his appearance, hitched up the towels around his waist, and stepped into the room. She was bending over one of her bags when Mr. Sears saw her, and she turned around and beckoned him.

'What was it you wanted?' he asked weakly.

'Can you snap this lock for me, please?'

'I'll try,' he said. 'What seems to be the trouble with it?'

'I don't know. It just won't fasten for me. Maybe you can make it work. You are stronger than I am.'

Mr. Sears straightened his shoulders and stepped across the floor to her side. He pushed the lock together and it snapped.

'That was all it needed,' she said, smiling down at Mr. Sears. 'I don't know what I would have done if you had not been here to help me with it.'

'Oh, that's all right,' he said, taking a step backward to balance himself.

After that he had expected to see her turn and go toward the door, but instead she went over to the bed and sat down upon it. The chairs were covered with Mr Sears's clothes and he had not thought to remove them. She sat on the bed looking at Mr. Sears, wrapped insecurely in his towels, until he wished the floor would open and drop him out of her sight. He noticed the suggestion of a smile on her lips, but he was too much occupied with his thoughts just then to smile back at her. While he waited for some excuse to come to mind that would let him go back to the bathroom, she crossed her legs and took a cigarette and a box of matches from her handbag.

Mr. Sears stood in the middle of the room glancing from the door to her and back again. The door was closed and it was locked.

'Come over here and sit down beside me,' she said, smiling at Mr. Sears. 'Maybe you can strike one of these matches for me. They break every time I try to light a cigarette.'

He went to the bed and sat down on the pillow at the head. She was arm's length from him, but it was as close as he dared go. He wished more than ever that he had his trousers on.

'Are you on the road?' she asked, when he had struck a match for her.

'Not any longer. I was for fifteen years, and then I went into the home office. I just came up to St. Louis today on a small matter of business for the company.'

'That's too bad,' she said. 'I know how much you miss the road. I'm awfully sorry.'

'I—that—well, I like both.'

'Oh, but the road is so much more thrilling than the office,' she said. 'I wouldn't leave it for any inducement now.'

'Leave what?'

'The road, of course.'

'Do you travel—I mean, are you a commercial traveller?'

'Certainly,' she said. 'I cover the South-West.'

'But I didn't know—I didn't know that——'

'You didn't know what?'

'Why! I didn't know that women were covering the territory now.'

'That's because you have been shut up in the home office for—how long is it?'

'Ten years.'

'Ten years! Then that's why you didn't know.'

Mr. Sears moved uncomfortably on the pillow. The young woman talked as if she knew more about commercial travelling than he did. Then he realized that he was no longer a salesman. He was an office manager.

'Anyway,' she said, 'women travellers are the best representatives for my line.'

'What's your line?' he asked quickly.

'Barbers' and beauty shop supplies,' she said. 'I travel out of Kansas City.'

Mr. Sears sat looking off into space. The young woman beside him turned to say something else, but when she saw the expression on his face, she waited to hear what he was going to say. Mr. Sears looked as if he would burst open if he did not say something soon.

'When were you in Dallas last?' he asked suddenly, leaning towards her.

'About two weeks ago. Why?'

'Have the hotels there put up the summer doors yet?'
'Yes, I believe they have.'
'Has the new railroad station in Houston been completed yet?'
'That was finished three years ago.'
'Do the hotels in New Orleans still have runners to meet all the trains?'
'Yes. Runners were meeting the trains there last week.'
'And in Kansas City——'
'Oh, in Kansas City the best hotels now employ girls for elevator operators. They wear trousers and coats just like boys.'
'They do!' Mr. Sears said. 'Just think of that! The last time I was in KC——'
'By the way,' the young woman asked, 'what did you say your name was?'
'Mr. Sears.'
'The first name?'
'It's Henry, but——'
'Henry? That's a good name, Hen. Mine's Jancy. Jancy is sometimes short for Jeanette.'
'Jeanette?' Mr. Sears said. 'Why! That's my wife's name!'
'Your wife? You're not married, are you, Hen?'
'Certainly,' Mr. Sears said. 'Her name is Jeanette, but I don't call her Jancy. I call her Jeanette.'
'You should call her Jancy, Hen. I'll bet she would like it.'
'Maybe when I go back to Memphis I'll——'
'Where is she now, Hen? Is she here with you?'
'She's at home in Memphis.'
'Well, that's better,' Jancy smiled. 'I don't care to be surprised in here with you, Hen. That wouldn't be so funny, would it?'

'No,' Mr. Sears said. 'My wife——'

'Oh, I know, Hen. All of them are alike. You don't have to tell me about her. I understand perfectly. Let's you and me just enjoy ourselves and have a good time. Do you know any new jokes? I heard a good one last night. A man in New Orleans took a sleeper for Chicago and when he got ready to——'

'But it's time for you to catch your train, isn't it, Miss——?'

'Just Jancy, Hen,' she said. 'But forget about the train. I've changed my mind. I'm not going to Wichita Falls tonight. These sleeper jumps get on my nerves sometimes, and all I want is a nice soft bed in a quiet hotel. Don't you ever feel that way sometimes, Hen?'

'Well, I used to when I was on the road. I've got accustomed to living at home now. Even hotels——'

Mr. Sears glanced nervously at the door once more. The young woman had moved closer to him, and he was already as far as he could move. The bed frame was hurting his side even then.

Jancy began taking off her hat. Mr. Sears sat up and took notice.

'Lay this on the table for me, will you, Hen?' she asked, placing the slanting little red hat in his hands. 'I want to take my hair down.'

Mr. Sears hitched up his towels and stepped jauntily across the floor with the little red hat. When he came back to the bed, Jancy was sitting in his place and shaking out her curls. Mr. Sears stood first on one foot and then on the other.

'But you can't spend the night in this room,' he said uneasily. 'Though I suppose I could let you have it, and ask the desk downstairs to give me another one.'

'Why do all that, Hen?' Jancy said, pointing to a place

on the bed where Mr. Sears could sit down. 'You talk as if you were never on the road in your whole life. Don't you ever think of expense accounts?'

Mr. Sears felt something turn over in his head. It was like listening to the well-oiled machinery in the Memphis plant. Everything worked so smoothly when all the moving parts were well oiled and when the belts and bands were in place.

He found himself walking back to the bathroom to hang up the towels, and, more surprisingly, he was humming to himself.

'By the way, Jancy,' he called through the door, 'what's the best hotel in Oklahoma City now?'

She did not answer immediately. He waited, listening for her answer. He was getting ready to repeat the question when something impelled him to turn around. She was standing in the doorway looking at him. He whistled through his teeth.

'Why do you want to know that, Hen? I thought you said you were not on the road any longer.'

'Well, I've been off the road for ten years now, but when I get back to Memphis, I'm going to see the president and tell him I want my old territory back again. I'm not going to stand for the way I've been treated, no sir-ree! I'm going to tell the president that you can't take a commercial traveller off the road and stick him into an office and expect him to settle down there for the rest of his life. And besides, I'm tired of going to the same house every night. Why, Jancy, that house has only got seven rooms in it, and every damn one of them is cluttered up with overstuffed furniture!'

He followed Jancy through the door and into the room. She sat down on the bed and kicked off her slippers.

Mr. Sears reached for the phone on the writing desk.

'What are you going to do, Hen?'

'The first thing I'm going to do is to have some sandwiches and beer sent up. We're going to make——' he stopped abruptly and began shouting into the mouthpiece. After he had shouted himself red in the face, he hung up and threw the phone on the desk. 'We're going to make a night of this,' he finished.

HERE AND TODAY

'WHAT was it?' Virginia remembered having said after dinner. 'What was it we used to tell each other in a half-serious manner? Was it that when the time comes to drop the pilot we won't cry on his shoulder?'

That was an hour before, but she remembered very clearly that Don had looked her squarely in the eyes and said: 'That was a long time ago. That's not here and today.'

He had put on his coat and hat and left the house. She had wanted to run to the door and kiss him, but, even though he waited for her to come, he pretended he was looking for his gloves. She had let him go out without kissing him.

Virginia realized she had been crying for nearly an hour when she looked up at the clock. It was a quarter past eight.

'What does she have that I haven't got? What does she give Don that I couldn't give him?'

Before she had finished saying the words she realized that love could not be itemized that way. She knew she had to make herself believe that it was a circumstance that had to be either accepted or rejected. She was not willing to make a decision then.

At eight-thirty she looked at the clock again. It was just

about the time Don would be walking into wherever it was he went. She did not know what part of town the place was, she did not know how many storeys there were in the building, she did not know how many rooms there were in the apartment. She did not know anything for sure, except that the girl's name was Lois, that Lois was two years younger than she, and that Lois had dark-brown bobbed hair.

The phone rang. It was Edna. Edna and Harry wanted Don and her to go to the movies with them. She told Edna that Don was not at home and that she was staying in that night. It was not that easy to fool Edna. Edna told her she was a fool to stay in and cry herself sick over Don. Virginia said good-bye and hung up.

It was all right for Edna to think like that and to talk like that, but she was not Edna. She loved Don, and she wanted to keep him no matter what happened. All she needed was some means to keep herself together until the time when he came back to her. It might be worth it in the end, no matter if the world crumbled to the ground in the meantime.

At five minutes to nine, she studied the face of the clock. Don and Lois. It was the time when they would be saying things to each other, kissing each other, holding each other. Don and Lois. From eight fifty-five to nine o'clock they would be deciding whether to stay in that evening or whether to go out and dance or see a show for a while first. Don and Lois.

'I wouldn't mind it so much,' she said partly aloud, 'if he were not giving her things that I want myself. I want every kiss, every touch, every look, every minute.'

No matter how hard she tried, she could not keep from looking at the clock again. What she saw was not numerals and time—she saw Don's face.

'Oh, God!' she cried.

When her eyes closed, she felt a leaden feeling that compressed her mind and body as surely as if it had been tons and tons of lead pressing against her. Under such an unbearable weight, she could feel her anger rise up within her to fight it off. It was a dull, steady ache by then. She tried to push the weight from her, she tried to keep the anger from overriding her thoughts, but in spite of herself it overcame her like a dark cloud which she was powerless to push away. The cloud sank around her, dragging her down with it. By then she did not know whether she was sitting, standing, or walking. She had reached the point where, numbed by misery and aching, she did not know what she was doing. She could have committed murder then, and not have known what she had done.

She went to the closet for her hat and cloak, not fully aware of what was taking place. She could not feel herself move, but she remembered seeing the walls of the room and the hall slide past her.

On the way down, the elevator boy smiled and bowed, and said: 'It's a nice bright evening out, Mrs. Warner. I wish I had tonight off.'

'I'm sorry you don't have it off, Frank,' she said.

By then she knew where she was. It was a pleasant sensation to feel herself coming down to earth so swiftly.

It was much cooler outside than she had imagined. The wind was sharp. Her cloak was a little light for such weather.

Two blocks down the street a man bumped into her accidentally. Both of them had their heads down against the wind, and when they ran together she almost lost her balance. She caught herself before he had a chance to help her.

'I'm sorry,' he said, taking off his hat.

She looked at him closely, studying his face from side to side. He looked about Don's age.

'Where are you going?' she asked impulsively.

'Why—I—have an appointment.'

'A girl?'

'Yes,' he said, smiling a little.

She hurried on down the street as fast as she could. She did not look back even once, because she was afraid by then that the man might try to catch up with her.

A block or more farther on she saw a movie house. She ran until she was in the midst of the crowd. When she looked back then she could see nothing of the man, and she felt relieved. She bought a ticket and got inside as quickly as she could.

Her eyes saw that an animated cartoon was on the screen. She noticed that, before she could accustom her eyes to the semi-darkness enough to find a seat. She sat down where the usher told her to sit down.

The audience was howling. Men, women, and children were laughing so loud that it was difficult to hear anything else. Virginia could not make herself laugh at first, but as the cartoon went on and on, she forgot herself and began laughing. It was only a few minutes more until she was laughing as loud as anyone else in the theatre. The short picture came to an end. The mirth lingered with her for a while, and she could not keep from smiling. Out of the corners of her eyes she watched a man and a girl next to her holding hands. That was all right, too. She had not felt so good in more than two months. After having been one with Don for all those years, it gave her a pleasant feeling to know that she was alone in the world, laughing and tingling in a strange body that was so new to her that she had not had time to become accustomed to it. It was a feeling more pleasant than she had ever imagined.

The feature picture was nearly half over before she saw it. She did not know what she had been looking at during all that time, because when she tried to recall, she had no memory of anything other than the strange new feeling in her body.

Suddenly there flashed across the screen another woman. She had not followed the story long enough to know that the picture had another woman in it, but Virginia recognized her the instant she saw her. There was no doubt about it. It was a woman in love with a man who was about to leave his wife for her.

Everything came back to Virginia at the precise point where it had left off. She could feel the heightened continuation of her misery and anger and hopelessness. She could feel the thing surge through her as if it had been liquid. She was bursting with it. She could not bear it another moment.

'I hope she chokes,' she said in a loud voice.

Instantly there was a murmur of voices all around her. People as far ahead as eight or nine rows turned around and looked in her direction. The usher came down the aisle and flashed his light on her, asking her in a gentle way if she wished to leave the theatre.

'I said, I hope she chokes to death!' Virginia said, louder, much louder than before.

At that moment the other woman on the screen turned and looked at Virginia. She was lovely to look at, but she was the other woman. Virginia could never forgive her for being that.

The usher had left in a hurry, and a moment later the manager came running down the aisle. She found herself being lifted out of her seat and carried up the aisle. The audience was in an uproar. Most of the people were standing up trying to get a glimpse of her in the semi-darkness.

She was carried into a small room furnished like an office. The manager was dipping a towel in water, wringing it out, and applying it to her forehead. The two ushers were fanning her with newspapers.

'Do you feel better now, madam?' the manager asked, looking deeply into her face.

Virginia began to cry and to laugh all at once.

'Get a doctor,' the manager said. 'I don't like the way she failed to come out of it.'

In what seemed like a mere moment the usher came back with a doctor. She closed her eyes when she saw his face.

'Just a slight nervous shock,' the doctor said later, getting to his feet and standing back to observe her.

All of twenty minutes had passed without her knowledge of time. She began to wonder if she had been lying on the couch in the manager's office for five minutes or five hours.

Virginia sat up.

'I'm all right now,' she said, putting her feet on the floor.

'Have you been worrying lately over any matter?' the doctor asked professionally, stepping closer again.

'Don,' she said without a thought.

The doctor turned around, nodded to the manager, and went out. The manager nodded to the two ushers, and went out. The two ushers looked at each other, winked, and held the door open for her.

'I want a taxi,' she said, walking bravely but weakly through the door between them. 'Get me a taxi right away. An orange-coloured taxi!'

When she got home, Frank smiled, bowed, and said: 'It has been a nice bright evening out, Mrs. Warner.'

She looked at Frank, stiff and erect in his green uniform.

'Has it?' she said.

He left her at her floor, waiting until she had found her key and let herself in.

The lights were on. She thought surely she would have turned them out when she left, no matter what her state of mind had been.

'Where have you been?' Don's voice said from somewhere in the room.

Virginia threw her hat and cloak off and ran to the other end of the room. He was lying back in his chair, a frayed newspaper across his knees.

'What time is it, Don? Why are you here now? What did you come back for?'

'It's about twelve,' he said. 'Where have you been?'

She sank down on the floor beside him.

'I've had a disgraceful experience, Don,' she said, looking up at him.

'What did you do?'

'I went to a movie and talked out loud.'

'Loud enough for everybody to hear you?'

'Yes.'

'Did they put you out?'

'Yes.'

'Have to carry you out?'

'Yes.'

He laughed a little, looking down at her curiously and tenderly.

'Don't worry about that,' he said, stroking her arm. 'It happens all the time. No names are ever taken, and it never gets into the papers. Forget about it, Virginia.'

She looked at him in amazement, shaking her head from side to side.

'Does it really happen—to other people, Don?'

'Of course.'

'How do you know?'

'Because I've seen it happen myself two or three times in my life, and I don't go to movies often, either.'

'What do they—we—say?'

'The same thing you probably said, or a variation of it.'

' "I hope she chokes" ? '

'Exactly.'

Virginia laid her head on the arm of his chair. It was a relief to know that Don was not angry with her for having behaved in public as she did. She was so happy about it that tears came into her eyes and rolled down her cheeks. She brushed them away quickly so she could talk to him.

'I'm not going to ask you to give her up—for a while, Don,' she said calmly and slowly.

He sat up, to see her face better.

'Are you talking about Lois?' he asked her.

'Yes, Don.'

'That's awfully decent of you, Virginia,' he said. 'What made you change your mind?'

'I didn't change it. I think I've just found out that there has never been but one answer since the world began.'

'What's that?'

'That it is natural for you to go to the most attractive person, and that the battle is between her and me. I've been fighting you all this time, trying to take you from her and bring you back to me. I know now that it is up to me to make you think I'm the most attractive. It's a waste of time for me to fight you—it's like calling up the wrong grocer and bawling him out for not delivering the coffee. What fighting is to be done will take place between her and me from now on—to prove which is the most attractive.'

He looked down at her, continuing to stroke her arm, and saw in her face something that he had known all their lives together. What he knew was that, no matter what

happened to others in similar situations, no matter what happened to them temporarily, no matter what happened to her or to him separately, it was to be certain for them to come back together in the future on a foundation even more solid and firm than it had been in the beginning. The thing was so clear and satisfying to both of them that there was no need of either of them saying it. It was something they knew. It was a knowledge that the fulfillment was to be as inevitable as life itself.

BALM OF GILEAD

BACK in January, about the middle of the first week, Ned Jones received a letter from the fire insurance agent's office in Bangor. The letter said that the company, effective January 1st, last, had discontinued allowing a discount on premiums covering farmhouses and barns which were equipped with lightning rods. Therefore, the letter said, the cost for protection on his buildings would be raised from twenty-fifty to twenty-two-fifty.

However, the letter went on, if the rods were already installed on the buildings, a lightning rod expert would call and inspect the terminals, ground wires, brads, and so forth, and if the expert found them in first-class condition, the discount would be reinstated. The charge for all of this, the letter concluded, would be three dollars for the inspector's time.

'Thunderation,' Ned said when he had finished reading the letter the third time. 'Hell and thunderation!'

It did not take him long to figure out that he would save a dollar by not having the lightning rods inspected, but even so he could see that it was going to cost him two dollars a year more to keep his buildings covered by insurance.

'That's thunderation,' he said.

His wife, Betty, was silent about the whole matter. She always froze up inside whenever something came up like that and threatened to cost an extra penny.

The insurance premium was not due and payable until February 1st, but a week before that time Ned got ready to make a trip to Bangor and pay a call at the insurance agent's office.

He and his wife started out to Bangor after breakfast, driving the old car slowly along the black-top road, taking care to stay as far on the right-hand side of the road as possible. The law was that a car owner would not have to carry liability and property damage insurance as long as he did not have a mishap. Ned was set on not having that first accident on the highways that would force him to pay insurance premiums for the right to drive his car. It was an old car anyway, about twelve years old, and he did not intend buying another one when it was worn out.

They got to Bangor just before ten o'clock in the forenoon, and, after finding a safe place to park and leave the automobile, Ned and his wife went straight to the agent's office.

They sat down on a bench in the hall and waited for several minutes, and then a girl took them to see Mr. Harmsworth.

'Now, about that insurance on my stand of buildings out at Gaylord,' Ned said, shaking his head and his finger at the agent.

'I take it you're upset about the new lightning rod clause, effective January 1st, last,' Mr. Harmsworth said, smiling at Ned and his wife. 'You see, Mr. Jones and Mrs. Jones, the company at the home office in New Hampshire rewrites the contracts, and we agents have nothing whatever to do with the terms the company dictates.'

'What do people in New Hampshire know about lightning rods anyway?' Ned said. 'Now let me tell you. I once knew a man in New Hampshire who——'

'Let's not get off the subject, Mr. Jones and Mrs. Jones,' Mr. Harmsworth said. 'After all, both my parents were born and raised in New Hampshire, and I'm sure there is a New Hampshire connection somewhere in your family, too.'

He smiled at Mrs. Jones, beaming upon her all the force of what he knew was a sunny smile. Betty refused to be disarmed. She was frozen up inside, and she intended to remain unthawed as long as the insurance company refused to make an adjustment that would not cost them an extra penny.

'Now, I've lived down here in the State of Maine for all my life,' Ned said, 'and I'm sixty and more right now, and lightning rods are the only things in the world that'll keep lightning from striking and setting fire to a house or barn. All my life I've seen lightning strike a spire and run down the cable into the ground without even so much as smoking up the roof and clapboards. If it wasn't for lightning rods——'

'Are you sure lightning runs down lightning rods, Mr. Jones and Mrs. Jones?' Mr. Harmsworth said. 'I was under the impression it ran up the rods, or rather made contact on the point of the spire. However——'

'Lightning is lightning, whether it runs up or down, or slantwise, if it has a mind to,' Ned said, rising up.

'I see you know a lot more about such things than I do,' Mr. Harmsworth laughed, beaming upon Mrs. Jones. 'I was raised here in the city, and I never had a chance to observe how lightning behaves when it comes in contact with a rod-equipped building. But, just the same, there's nothing either you or I can do about this here clause, be-

cause the home office rewrote the contract and sent us the printed forms, and I'm merely their representative. I carry out their orders, but I have no authority to alter a clause in a contract.'

Ned looked at his wife, and she shook her head. That was all he wanted to know. No insurance company, with a home office in New Hampshire, run by New Hampshire people, was going to tell him whether they thought lightning-rods were protection or not. He looked at his wife again, and shook his head. Betty tightened her mouth, freezing tighter inside, and nodded at Ned.

Mr. Harmsworth shuffled some papers on his desk, and, bringing one out with much crinkling and creasing, laid it before Ned.

'This is your bill for fire protection coverage, due February 1st,' he said, glancing quickly at Ned, but not looking at Mrs. Jones.

Ned pushed it back at him.

'Now, about this Balm of Gilead,' Ned said, edging forward in his chair.

'What Balm of Gilead?' Mr. Harmsworth asked, startled. 'What's that?'

Ned looked at his wife, and Betty nodded. That was what he wanted to know from her. He pulled his chair closer to the desk.

'My Balm of Gilead,' he said. 'I've got one in my dooryard; fourteen feet from the west wall of my dwelling house, and twenty-two feet from the east wall of my barn.'

'What's a Balm of Gilead?' Mr. Harmsworth asked, still startled. 'Wasn't that something in the Bible? How'd you get any discount on your fire insurance for having a tree.'

Ned and Betty looked at each other, but neither of them made any motion of the head.

'Balm of Gilead is a tree,' Ned said. 'My Balm of Gilead

was set out by my father, seventy-seven years ago, and it stands in my dooryard.'

'What about it?' Mr. Harmsworth asked, wild-eyed.

'It's a lightning rod,' Ned said. 'It's the finest lightning rod on earth. After a Balm of Gilead——'

'You want us to give you a discount because you have a tree——' Mr. Harmsworth began, sitting forward in his chair.

'—passes its fiftieth year, it turns into a lightning-rod,' Ned continued doggedly. 'Lightning won't strike any other thing within fifty yards of it. Lightning strikes the Balm of Gilead every time.'

'I don't know what you're driving at exactly,' Mr. Harmsworth said, 'but I wouldn't suppose you expect to get any discount on your fire insurance for having a tree like that.'

Betty stiffened her backbone.

'I don't know why not,' Ned said. 'Why shouldn't I get a discount when I've got a Balm of Gilead located almost half-way between my two buildings, and the farthest is twenty-two feet from it. A tree like that is two or three times more protection than rods on the buildings. Why, it even makes the buildings proof against lightning! I figure I'm due five or six dollars discount for having that tree where it is.'

Mr. Harmsworth scratched his head and took a swift look at Mrs. Jones. He had time to see that her mouth was drawn in a tight line across her face. He did not look at her again.

'If you insist upon it,' he said, 'I'll take it up with the home office in New Hampshire. I won't be able to do a thing until I hear from them. But I shouldn't think they would allow anybody a discount on fire insurance for having a Balm of Gilead tree.'

'If they wasn't those New Hampshire people,' Ned said, 'they'd know how much protection a tree like that is.'

'I'll write you a letter and let you know what the home office has to say just as soon as I get their answer,' he said, standing up.

Ned and Betty got up and went out into the hall. Mr. Harmsworth followed them trying to shake hands with at least one of them. Betty kept her hands clasped tightly across her waist. Ned outwalked the agent to the street.

'Ignorant young cuss,' Ned said. 'Associates with New Hampshire people.'

Betty nodded her head.

They bought a few things in a store, and then got into their car and drove home. Neither of them mentioned the insurance during the rest of the day.

During the remainder of the week, and through the first three days of the following one, both Ned and his wife watched the mail for the letter from the agent in Bangor. On the third day the letter came.

They went into the kitchen and sat down in the chairs by the window before opening it. Ned first took out his glasses and carefully polished the lenses. Betty put her handkerchief to her nose, and then put it away. Ned read the letter aloud.

'DEAR MR. JONES:

'I have taken up the matter of the Balm of Gilead tree in your dooryard with the home office in New Hampshire, and I am herewith advising you of their decision. It seems that the company thought it was all a joke or something because, in their own words, they wished to know if your Balm of Gilead tree would "catch mice, scare crows away, and cure painter's colic." Farther along in their letter they state most emphatically that under no circumstances

would a discount on fire insurance premiums be allowed for possession of a Balm of Gilead tree. . . .'

The letter did not end there, but Ned read no farther. He handed the letter to his wife, and she laid it aside on the table, drawing her mouth into a thin straight line across her face.

'I never did waste any feelings for the people of New Hampshire,' Ned said, putting away his glasses, getting his hat, and standing up.

His wife did not say a word when he left the kitchen and went out into the dooryard.

When she saw him come out of the woodshed with the axe and the crosscut saw, she put on her jacket and went out to help him.

First he cut a notch in the Balm of Gilead on the side in order to fell it in the direction where he wanted it to fall. When that was done, he picked up one end of the crosscut, and Betty picked up the other end. They began sawing silently, their faces bright but drawn in tight lines, and both hoping that an electrical storm would come early in the spring, and each of them praying silently that lightning would strike the house and burn it to a heap of ashes on the ground.

THE PEOPLE *v.* ABE LATHAN, COLOURED

UNCLE Abe was shucking corn in the crib when Luther Bolick came down from the big white house on the hill and told him to pack up his household goods and move off the farm. Uncle Abe had grown a little deaf and he did not hear what Luther said the first time.

'These old ears of mine is bothering me again, Mr. Luther,' Uncle Abe said. 'I just can't seem to hear as good as I used to.'

Luther looked at the negro and scowled. Uncle Abe had got up and was standing in the crib door where he could hear better.

'I said, I want you and your family to pack up your furniture and anything else that really belongs to you, and move off.'

Uncle Abe reached out and clutched at the crib door for support.

'Move off?' Uncle Abe said.

He looked into his landlord's face unbelievingly.

'Mr. Luther, you don't mean that, does you?' Uncle Abe asked, his voice shaking. 'You must be joking, ain't you, Mr. Luther?'

'You heard me right, even if you do pretend to be half deaf,' Luther said angrily, turning around and walking several steps. 'I want you off the place by the end of the week. I'll give you that much time if you don't try to make any trouble. And when you pack up your things, take care you don't pick up anything that belongs to me, or I'll have the law on you.'

Uncle Abe grew weak so quickly that he barely managed to keep from falling. He turned a little and slid down the side of the door and sat on the crib floor. Luther looked around to see what he was doing.

'I'm past sixty,' Uncle Abe said slowly, 'but me and my family works hard for you, Mr. Luther. We work as hard as anybody on your whole place. You know that's true, Mr. Luther. I've lived here, working for you, and your daddy before you, for all of forty years. I never mentioned to you about the shares, no matter how big the crop was that I raised for you. I've never asked much, just enough to eat and a few clothes, that's all. I raised up a houseful of children to help work, and none of them ever made any trouble for you, did they, Mr. Luther?'

Luther waved his arm impatiently, indicating that he wanted the negro to stop arguing. He shook his head, showing that he did not want to listen to anything Uncle Abe had to say.

'That's all true enough,' Luther said, 'but I've got to get rid of half the tenants on my place. I can't afford to keep eight or ten old people like you here any longer. All of you will have to move off and go somewhere else.'

'Ain't you going to farm this year and raise cotton, Mr. Luther?' Uncle Abe asked. 'I can still work as good and hard as anybody else. It may take me a little longer sometimes, but I get the work done. Ain't I shucking

this corn to feed the mules as good as anybody else could do?'

'I haven't got time to stand here and argue with you,' Luther said nervously. 'My mind is made up, and that's all there is to it. Now, you go on home as soon as you finish feeding the mules and start packing the things that belong to you like I told you.'

Luther turned away and started walking down the path toward the barn. When he got as far as the barnyard gate, he turned around and looked back. Uncle Abe had followed him.

'Where can me and my family move to, Mr. Luther?' Uncle Abe said. 'The boys is big enough to take care of themselves. But me and my wife has grown old. You know how hard it is for an old coloured man like me to go out and find a house and land to work on shares. It don't cost you much to keep us, and me and my boys raise as much cotton as anybody else. The last time I mentioned the shares has been a long way in the past, thirty years or more. I'm just content to work like I do and get some rations and a few clothes. You know that's true, Mr. Luther. I've lived in my little shanty over there for all of forty years, and it's the only home I've got. Mr. Luther, me and my wife is both old now, and I can't hire out to work by the day, because I don't have the strength any more. But I can still grow cotton as good as any other coloured man in the country.'

Luther opened the barnyard gate and walked through it. He shook his head as though he was not even going to listen any longer. He turned his back on Uncle Abe and walked away.

Uncle Abe did not know what to say or do after that. When he saw Luther walk away, he became shaky all over. He clutched at the gate for something to hold on to.

'I just can't move away, Mr. Luther,' he said desperately. 'I just can't do that. This is the only place I've got to live in the world. I just can't move off, Mr. Luther.'

Luther walked out of sight round the corner of the barn. He did not hear Uncle Abe after that.

The next day, at a little after two o'clock in the afternoon, a truck drove up to the door of the three-room house where Uncle Abe, his wife, and their three grown sons lived. Uncle Abe and his wife were sitting by the fire trying to keep warm in the winter cold. They were the only ones at home then.

Uncle Abe heard the truck drive up and stop, but he sat where he was, thinking it was his oldest boy, Henry, who drove a truck sometimes for Luther Bolick.

After several minutes had passed, somebody knocked on the door, and his wife got up right away and went to see who it was.

There were two strange white men on the porch when she opened the door. They did not say anything at first but looked inside the room to see who was there. Still not saying anything, they came inside and walked to the fireplace where Uncle Abe sat hunched over the hearth.

'Are you Abe Lathan?' one of the men, the oldest, asked.

'Yes, sir, I'm Abe Lathan,' he answered, wondering who they were, because he had never seen them before. 'Why do you want to know that?'

The man took a bright metal disk out of his pocket and held it in the palm of his hand before Uncle Abe's eyes.

'I'm serving a paper and a warrant on you,' he said. 'One is an eviction, and the other is for threatening to do bodily harm.'

He unfolded the eviction notice and handed it to Uncle Abe. The negro shook his head bewilderedly, looking

first at the paper and finally up at the two strange white men.

'I'm a deputy,' the older man said, 'and I've come for two things—to evict you from this house and to put you under arrest.'

'What does that mean—evict?' Uncle Abe asked.

The two men looked around the room for a moment. Uncle Abe's wife had come up behind his chair and put trembling hands on his shoulder.

'We are going to move your furniture out of this house and carry it off the property of Luther Bolick. Then, besides that, we're going to take you down to the county jail. Now, come on and hurry up, both of you.'

Uncle Abe got up, and he and his wife stood on the hearth not knowing what to do.

The two men began gathering up the furniture and carrying it out of the house. They took the beds, tables, chairs, and everything else in the three rooms except the cookstove, which belonged to Luther Bolick. When they got all the things outside, they began piling them into the truck.

Uncle Abe went outside in front of the house as quickly as he could.

'White folks, please, don't do that,' he begged. 'Just wait a minute while I go find Mr. Luther. He'll set things straight. Mr. Luther is my landlord, and he won't let you take all my furniture away like this. Please, sir, just wait while I go find him.'

The two men looked at each other.

'Luther Bolick is the one who signed these papers,' the deputy said, shaking his head. 'He was the one who got these court orders to carry off the furniture and put you in jail. It wouldn't do you a bit of good to try to find him now.'

'Put me in jail?' Uncle Abe said. 'What did he say to do that for?'

'For threatening bodily harm,' the deputy said. 'That's for threatening to kill him. Hitting him with a stick or shooting him with a pistol.'

The men threw the rest of the household goods into the truck and told Uncle Abe and his wife to climb in the back. When they made no effort to get in, the deputy pushed them to the rear and prodded them until they climbed into the truck.

While the younger man drove the truck, the deputy stood beside them in the body so they could not escape. They drove out the lane, past the other tenant houses, and then down the long road that went over the hill through Luther Bolick's land to the public highway. They passed the big white house where he lived, but he was not within sight.

'I never threatened to harm Mr. Luther,' Uncle Abe protested. 'I never did a thing like that in my whole life. I never said a mean thing about him either. Mr. Luther is my boss, and I've worked for him ever since I was twenty years old. Yesterday he said he wanted me to move off his farm, and all I did was say that I thought he ought to let me stay. I won't have much longer to live, noway. I told him I didn't want to move off. That's all I said to Mr. Luther. I ain't never said I was going to try to kill him. Mr. Luther knows that as well as I do. You ask Mr. Luther if that ain't so.'

They had left Luther Bolick's farm, and had turned down the highway toward the county seat, eleven miles away.

'For forty years I has lived here and worked for Mr. Luther,' Uncle Abe said, 'and I ain't never said a mean thing to his face or behind his back in all that time. He

furnishes me with rations for me and my family, and a few clothes, and me and my family raise cotton for him, and I been doing that ever since I was twenty years old. I moved here and started working on shares for his daddy first, and then when he died, I kept right on like I have up to now. Mr. Luther knows I has worked hard and never answered him back, and only asked for rations and a few clothes all this time. You ask Mr. Luther.'

The deputy listened to all that Uncle Abe said, but he did not say anything himself. He felt sorry for the old negro and his wife, but there was nothing he could do about it. Luther Bolick had driven to the court-house early that morning and secured the papers for eviction and arrest. It was his job to serve the papers and execute the court orders. But even if it was his job, he could not keep from feeling sorry for the negroes. He didn't think that Luther Bolick ought to throw them off his farm just because they had grown old.

When they got within sight of town, the deputy told the driver to stop. He drew the truck up beside the highway when they reached the first row of houses. There were fifteen or eighteen negro houses on both sides of the road.

After they had stopped, the two white men began unloading the furniture and stacking it beside the road. When it was all out of the truck, the deputy told Uncle Abe's wife to get out. Uncle Abe started to get out, too, but the deputy told him to stay where he was. They drove off again, leaving Uncle Abe's wife standing in a dazed state of mind beside the furniture.

'What are you going to do with me now?' Uncle Abe asked, looking back at his wife and furniture in the distance.

'Take you to the county jail and lock you up,' the deputy said.

'What's my wife going to do?' he asked.

'The people in one of those houses will probably take her in.'

'How long is you going to keep me in jail locked up?'

'Until your case comes up for trial.'

They drove through the dusty streets of the town, round the courthouse square, and stopped in front of a brick building with iron bars across the windows.

'Here's where we get out,' the deputy said.

Uncle Abe was almost too weak to walk by that time, but he managed to move along the path to the door. Another white man opened the door and told him to walk straight down the hall until he was told to stop.

Just before noon Saturday, Uncle Abe's oldest son, Henry, stood in Ramsey Clark's office, hat in hand. The lawyer looked at the negro and frowned. He chewed his pencil for a while, then swung round in his chair and looked out the window into the court-house square. Presently he turned around and looked at Uncle Abe's son.

'I don't want the case,' he said. 'I don't want to touch it.'

The boy stared at him helplessly. It was the third lawyer he had gone to see that morning, and all of them had refused to take his father's case.

'There's no money in it,' Ramsey Clark said, still frowning. 'I'd never get a dime out of you niggers if I took this case. And, besides, I don't want to represent any more niggers at court. Better lawyers than me have been ruined that way. I don't want to get the reputation of being a "nigger lawyer." '

Henry shifted the weight of his body from one foot to the other and bit his lips. He did not know what to say. He stood in the middle of the room trying to think of a way to get help for his father.

'My father never said he was going to kill Mr. Luther,' Henry protested. 'He's always been on friendly terms with Mr. Luther. None of us ever gave Mr. Luther trouble. Anybody will tell you that. All the other tenants on Mr. Luther's place will tell you my father has always stood up for Mr. Luther. He never said he was going to try to hurt Mr. Luther.'

The lawyer waved for him to stop. He had heard all he wanted to listen to.

'I told you I wouldn't touch the case,' he said angrily, snatching up some papers and slamming them down on his desk. 'I don't want to go into court and waste my time arguing a case that won't make any difference one way or the other, anyway. It's a good thing for you niggers to get a turn on the 'gang every once in a while. It doesn't make any difference whether Abe Lathan threatened Mr. Bolick, or whether he didn't threaten him. Abe Lathan said he wasn't going to move off the farm, didn't he? Well, that's enough to convict him in court. When the case comes up for trial, that's all the judge will want to hear. He'll be sent to the 'gang quicker than a flea can hop. No lawyer is going to spend a lot of time preparing a case when he knows how it's going to end. If there was money in it, it might be different. But you niggers don't have a thin dime to pay me with. No, I don't want the case. I wouldn't touch it with a ten-foot pole.'

Henry backed out of Ramsey Clark's office and went to the jail. He secured permission to see his father for five minutes.

Uncle Abe was sitting on his bunk in the cage looking through the bars when Henry entered. The jailer came and stood behind him at the cage door.

'Did you see a lawyer and tell him I never said nothing like that to Mr. Luther?' Uncle Abe asked the first thing.

Henry looked at his father, but it was difficult for him to answer. He shook his head, dropping his gaze until he could see only the floor.

'You done tried, didn't you, Henry?' Uncle Abe asked.

Henry nodded.

'But when you told the lawyers how I ain't never said a mean thing about Mr. Luther, or his daddy before him, in all my whole life, didn't they say they was going to help me get out of jail?'

Henry shook his head.

'What did the lawyers say, Henry? When you told them how respectful I've always been to Mr. Luther, and how I've always worked hard for him all my life, and never mentioned the shares, didn't they say they would help me then?'

Henry looked at his father, moving his head sideways in order to see him between the bars of the cage. He had to swallow hard several times before he could speak at all.

'I've already been to see three lawyers,' he said finally. 'All three of them said they couldn't do nothing about it, and to just go ahead and let it come up for trial. They said there wasn't nothing they could do, because the judge would give you a term on the 'gang, anyway.'

He stopped for a moment, looking down at his father's feet through the bars.

'If you want me to, I'll go see if I can try to find some other lawyers to take the case. But it won't do much good. They just won't do anything.'

Uncle Abe sat down on his bunk and looked at the floor. He could not understand why none of the lawyers would help him. Presently he looked up through the bars at his son. His eyes were fast filling with tears that he could not control.

'Why did the lawyers say the judge would give me a term on the 'gang, anyway, Henry?' he asked.

Henry gripped the bars, thinking about all the years he had seen his father and mother working in the cotton fields for Luther Bolick and being paid in rations, a few clothes, and a house to live in, and nothing more.

'Why did they say that for, Henry?' his father insisted.

'I reckon because we is just coloured folks,' Henry said at last. 'I don't know why else they would say things like that.'

The jailer moved up behind Henry, prodding him with his stick. Henry walked down the hall between the rows of cages toward the door that led to the street. He did not look back.

BIG BUCK

WHEN the sun went down, there were a heap of people just tramping up and down the dusty road without a care in the whole wide world. It was Saturday night and the cool of the evening was coming on, and that was enough to make a lot of folks happy. There were a few old logging mules plodding along in the dust with a worried look on their faces, but they had a right to look that way, because they had worked hard in the swamp all week and supper-time had come and gone, and they were still a long way from home.

It was the best time of the whole year for coloured people, because it was so hot the whites didn't stir around much, and a coloured man could walk up and down in the big road as much as he wanted to. The women and girls were all dressed up in starched white dresses and bright silk hair-bows, and the men had on their Sunday clothes.

All at once a hound dog somewhere down the road started barking his head off. You could look down that way, but you couldn't see anything much, because the moon hadn't come up yet. The boys stopped in the middle of the road and listened. The old dog just kept on barking.

They didn't say much, but they knew good and well those old hound dogs never took the trouble to get up and bark unless it was a stranger they smelled.

'Take care yourself, nigger!' the black boy in the yellow hat yelled. 'Stand back and hold your breath, because if you don't, you won't never know what hit you.'

'What you talking about, anyhow?' Jimson said.

'I just turned around and looked down the road,' Moses said, 'and I saw a sight that'll make your eyes pop out of your head.'

'What you see, nigger?' Jimson asked, trembling like a quiver-bug. 'You see something scary?'

'I seen Big Buck,' Moses said, his voice weak and thin. 'I seen him more than once, too, because I looked back twice to make sure I saw right the first time.'

The two Negroes backed off the road into the ditch and pulled the bushes round them. They squatted there a while listening. Farther up the road people were laughing and singing, and talking loud. The old hound dog down the road was barking like he just wouldn't give up.

'Ain't no sense in Big Buck scaring the daylights out of folks the way he does,' Jimson said. 'It's a sin the way he keeps on doing it.'

'Big Buck don't exactly aim to set out to scare folks,' Moses said. 'People just naturally get the shakes when he comes anywhere around, that's all. It ain't Big Buck's fault none. He's as gentle as a baby.'

'Then how come you're sitting here, squatting in these bushes, if he ain't nothing to be scared of?'

Moses didn't say anything. They pulled the bushes back a little and looked down the road. They couldn't see much of Big Buck, because it had been dark ever since sundown; but they could hear his feet flapping in the dusty

road as plain as cypress trees falling in the swamp in broad daylight.

'Maybe he once was gentle, when he was a baby himself,' Jimson said. 'Maybe he is now, when he's asleep in his bed. But last Saturday night down at the crossroads store he didn't act like no baby I ever knew.'

'What did he do down there?' Moses asked.

'He said he liked the looks of the striped band on my new straw hat, and then he slapped me so hard on the back I hit the ground smack with my face. That's how like a baby Big Buck is. I know, I do.'

'Quit your jabbering,' Moses whispered. 'Here he comes!'

They pulled the bushes round them and squatted closer to the ground so they wouldn't be seen. They took off their hats and ducked down as far as they could so their heads wouldn't show. They were mighty glad it had got as dark as it was.

'Just look at that courting fool,' Jimson whispered. 'Ain't he the biggest sport you ever did see? He's all dressed up in yellow shoes and red necktie ready to flash them colours on the first gal he sees. That courting fool can do courting where courting's never been done before. Man alive, don't I wish I was him! I'd get me a high yellow and——'

'Shut your big mouth, nigger!' Moses whispered, slamming Jimson in the ribs with his elbow. 'He'll jump us here in these bushes sure, if you don't shut that big mouth of yours.'

Big Buck swung up the road like his mind was made up beforehand just exactly where he was headed. He was whistling as loud as a sawmill engine at Saturday afternoon quitting time, and throwing his head back and swinging his arms like he was sitting on top of the world.

He was on his way to do some courting, it was plain to see.

The coloured boys in the bushes shook until their bones rattled.

Then right square in front of the bushes Big Buck stopped and looked. There wasn't no cat that could see better than him in the dark. His big black face only had to turn toward what he wanted to see, and there it was as plain as day in front of his eyes.

'You niggers is going to shake all the leaves right off them poor bushes,' Big Buck said, grinning until his teeth glistened like new tombstones in the moonlight. 'Why you boys want to go and do that to them pretty little trees?'

He reached an arm across the ditch and caught hold of a woolly head. He pulled his arm back into the road.

'What's your name, nigger?' he said.

'I'm Jimson, Mr. Big Buck,' the coloured boy said. 'Just Jimson's my name.'

Big Buck reached his other arm into the bushes and caught hold of another woolly head. He yanked on it until Moses came hopping out into the road. He and Jimson stood there under Big Buck's arms trembling worse than the leaves on the bushes had done.

'What's your name, black boy?' Big Buck said.

'This is little Moses,' he answered.

'Little Moses how-many?'

'Just little Moses March.'

'That's a funny name to have in August, boy,' Big Buck said, shaking him by the hair until Moses wished he'd never been born. 'What you quivering like that for, boy? Ain't nothing to be scared of if you change your name to August.'

'Yes, sir, Mr. Big Buck,' Moses said. 'I'll change it. I'll

change my name just like you said. I'll do just like you told me. I sure will, Mr. Big Buck.'

Big Buck turned Moses loose and laughed all over. He slapped Jimson on the back between the shoulders and, before Jimson knew what had happened, the ground rose up and smacked him square in the face. Big Buck looked down at Jimson and raised him to his feet by gripping a handful of woolly hair in his hand. He stood back and laughed some more.

'You peewees don't have to act like you is scared out of your mind,' Big Buck said. 'I ain't going to hurt nobody. You boys is my friends. If it wasn't so late and if I wasn't on my way to do some courting, I'd stop a while and shoot you some craps.'

He hitched up his pants and tightened up his necktie. The boys couldn't help admiring his bright yellow shoes and red necktie that looked like a red lantern hanging around his neck.

'Whichaway is it to Singing Sal's house from here?' he asked.

'Whoses house?' Jimson asked, his mouth hanging open. 'Whoses house did you say?'

'I said Singing Sal's,' Big Buck answered.

'You don't mean Singing Sal, does you, Mr. Big Buck?' Moses asked. 'You couldn't mean her, because Singing Sal ain't never took no courting. She's mule-headed—'

'You heard me, peewee,' Big Buck said. 'I say what I mean, and I mean Singing Sal. Whichaway does she live from here?'

'Is you fixing to court her, sure enough?' Moses asked.

'That's what I'm headed for,' he said, 'and I'm in a big hurry to get there. You peewees come on and show me the way to get to where that gal lives.'

Jimson and Moses ran along beside him, trotting to keep

up with the long strides. They went half a mile before anybody said anything.

Every time they met a knot of people in the road, the folks jumped into the ditch to let Big Buck pass. Big Buck didn't weigh more than two hundred and fifty pounds and he wasn't much over seven feet tall, but it looked like he took up all the space there was in a road when he swung along it. The women and girls sort of giggled when he went by, but Big Buck didn't turn his head at all. He kept straight up the big road like a hound on a live trail.

It wasn't long before Jimson and Moses were puffing and blowing, and they didn't know how much longer they could keep up with Big Buck if he didn't stop soon and give them a chance to get their breath back. The folks in the road scattered like a covey of quail.

When they got to the fork in the road, Big Buck stopped and asked them which way to go.

'It's over that way, across the creek,' Jimson said, breathing hard. 'If you didn't have no objection, I'd like to tag along behind you the rest of the way. Me and Moses was going over that way, anyway.'

'I don't aim to waste no time knocking on wrong people's doors,' Big Buck said, 'and I want you boys to lead me straight to the place I want to go. Come on and don't waste no more time standing here.'

They swung down the right-hand way. There weren't many houses down there and they didn't lose any time. Big Buck was away out in front and the boys had a hard time keeping up.

They passed a couple of houses and went up the hill from the bridge over the creek. Big Buck started humming a little tune to himself. He didn't mind climbing a hill any more than walking on level ground.

When they got to the top, Big Buck stopped and hitched

up his pants. He wiped the dust off his new yellow shoes with his pants' legs, and then he tightened up the red necktie until it almost choked him.

'That's the place,' Jimson said, pointing.

'Then here's where I light,' Big Buck said. 'Here's where I hang my hat.'

He started toward the cabin through the gap in the split-rail fence. He stopped half-way and called back:

'I'm mighty much obliged to you boys,' he said.

He dug into his pants and tossed a bright dime to them. Jimson got it before it was lost in the dark.

'You boys helped me save a lot of time, and I'm mighty much obliged,' he said.

'You ain't going to try to court that there Singing Sal, sure enough, is you Mr. Big Buck?' Jimson asked. He and Moses came as far as the fence and leaned on it. 'Everybody says Singing Sal won't take no courting. Some say she ain't never took not even a whiff of it. Folks have even got themselves hurt, just trying to.'

'She just ain't never had the right man come along before and give it to her,' Big Buck said. 'I've heard all that talk about how she won't take no courting, but she'll be singing a different tune when I get through with her.'

Big Buck took a few steps toward the cabin door. Moses backed off toward the road. He wasn't taking no chances, because Singing Sal had a habit of shooting off a shotgun when she didn't want to be bothered. Moses backed away. Jimson stayed where he was and tried to get Moses to come closer so they could see what happened when Big Buck started inside.

'There ain't nothing to be scared of, Moses,' Jimson said. 'Big Buck knows what he's doing, or he wouldn't have come all the way here like he done.'

Big Buck hitched up his pants again and picked his way round the woodpile and over an old washtub full of rusty tin cans. He put one foot on the porch step and tried it with his weight to see how solid it was. The step squeaked and swayed, but it held him up.

Out in the yard by the sagging split-rail fence Jimson and Moses hung on to a post and waited to see. When Big Buck rapped on the door, their breath was stuck tight inside of them. There wasn't time to breathe before a chair fell over backward inside the cabin. Right after that a big tin pan was knocked off a table or shelf or something, and it fell on the floor with a big racket, too. She sure had been taken by surprise.

'Who's that at my door?' Singing Sal said. 'What you want, whoever you is?'

Big Buck kicked the door with one of his big yellow shoes. The whole building shook.

'Your man has done come,' he said, rattling and twisting the door-knob. 'Open up and let your good man inside, gal.'

'Go away from here, nigger, while you is good and able,' Singing Sal said. 'I ain't got no time to be wasting on you, whoever you is. Now, just pick up your feet and mosey on away from my house.'

'Honey,' Big Buck said, getting a good grip on the knob, 'I done made up my mind a long time back to start my courting while the victuals is hot. Just set me down a plate and pull me up a chair.'

Before he could move an inch, a blast from Singing Sal's shotgun tore through the flimsy door. It didn't come anywhere near Big Buck, but it did sort of set him back on his heels for a minute. Then he hitched up his pants and yanked on the knob.

'Put that plaything down before you hurt yourself,

honey,' he shouted through the hole in the door. 'Them things don't scare me one bit.'

He gave the knob a jerk, and it broke off, and the lock with it. The door opened slowly, and the yellow lamplight fell across the porch and yard as far as the woodpile. He strutted inside while Singing Sal stared at him wild-eyed. Nobody had ever come through her door like that before. He acted like he wasn't scared of nothing in the world, not even double-barrel shotguns.

'Who's you?' she asked, her eyes popping.

He started grinning at her, and his whole mouth looked like it was going to split open from one ear to the other.

'I'm your man, honey,' he said, 'and I've come to do you some courting.'

He walked on past her, looking her over from top to bottom while she stood in a daze. He walked round her to get a good look at her from behind. She didn't move an inch, she was that up in the air.

Jimson and Moses crept a little closer, going as far as the woodpile. They stayed behind it so they would have a place to dodge in case Singing Sal got hold of herself and started shooting again.

'I'm Big Buck from the far end of the swamp, honey,' he said. 'You must have heard of me before, because I've been around this part of the country most all my life. It's too bad I've been this long in getting here for some courting. But here I is, honey. Your good man has done come at last.'

He pulled up a chair and sat down at the table. He wiped off the red-and-yellow oilcloth with his coat sleeve and reached to the cookstove for a skillet full of pout-mouthed perch. While he was getting the fish with one hand, he reached the other one over and picked up the coffee pot and poured himself a cupful. When that was

done, he reached into the oven and got himself a handful of hot biscuits. All the time he was doing that, Singing Sal just stood and looked like she had just woke up out of a long sleep.

'You sure is a fine cook, honey,' Big Buck said. 'My, oh, my! I'd go courting every night if I could find good eating like these pout-mouthed perches and them hot biscuits.'

After Big Buck had taken a bite of fish in one gulp and a whole biscuit in another, Singing Sal shook herself and reached down on the floor for the shotgun she dropped when she shot it off the first time. She brought it up and levelled it off at Big Buck and squeezed one eye shut. Big Buck cut his eyes round at her and took another big bite of perch.

'Honey, shut that door and keep the chilly night air out,' he told her, pouring another cup of coffee. 'I don't like to feel a draught down the back of my neck when I'm setting and eating.'

Singing Sal raised one ear to hear what he was saying, and then she sighted some more down the barrel of the shotgun, but by then it was waving like she couldn't draw a bead any more. She was shaking so she couldn't hold it at all, and so she stood it on its end. After she had rested a minute, she clicked the hammer until it was uncocked, and put the shotgun back under the bed.

'Where'd you come from, anyhow?' she asked Big Buck.

'Honey, I done told you I come from back in the swamp where I cut them cypress trees all week long,' he said. 'If I had known how fine it is here, I wouldn't have waited for Saturday to come. I'd have gone and been here a long time back before this, honey.'

He took another helping of fish and poured himself some more hot black coffee. All the biscuits were gone, the whole

breadpan full. He felt on the oilcloth and tried to find some crumbs with his fingers.

Singing Sal walked behind his chair and looked him over good from head to toe. He didn't pay no attention to her at all. He didn't even say another word until he finished eating all the fried fish he wanted.

Then he pushed the table away from him, wiped his mouth, and swung a long arm round behind him. His arm caught Singing Sal around the middle and brought her up beside him. He spread open his legs and stood her between them. Then he took another good look at her from top to bottom.

'You look as good as them pout-mouthed perch and hot biscuits I done ate, honey,' he said to her. 'My, oh, my!'

He reached up and set her down on his lap. Then he reached out and kissed her hard on the mouth.

Singing Sal swung her nearest arm, and her hand landed square on Big Buck's face. He laughed right back at her. She swung her other arm, but her fist just bounced off his face like it had been a rubber ball.

He reached out to grab her to him, and she let go with both fists, both knees, and the iron lid cover from the top of the skillet. Big Buck went down on the floor when the iron lid hit him, and Singing Sal landed on top of him swinging both the iron lid and the iron water kettle with all her might. The kettle broke, and pieces of it flew all over the room. Big Buck pushed along the floor, and she hit him with the skillet, the coffee pot, and the top of the table. That looked like it was enough to do him in, but he still had courting on his mind. He reached out to grab her to him, and she hit him over the head with the oven door.

Singing Sal had been stirring around as busy as a cat with its fur on fire, and she was out of breath. She sort of

wobbled backward and rested against the foot of the bed, all undone.

She was panting and blowing, and she didn't know what to pick up next to hit him with. It looked to her like it didn't do no good to hit him at all, because things bounced off him like they would have against a brick wall. She hadn't ever seen a man like him before in all her life. She didn't know before that there was a man made like him at all.

'Honey,' Big Buck said, 'you sure is full of fire. You is my kind of gal to court. My, oh, my!'

He reached up and grabbed her. She didn't move much, and he tugged again. She acted like she was a post in a posthole, she was that solid when he tried to budge her. He grabbed her again, and she went down on top of him like a sack of corn. She rolled off on the floor, and her arms and legs thrashed around like she was trying to beat off bees and hornets. Big Buck got a grip on her and she rolled over on her back and lay there quiet, acting like she hadn't ever tussled with him at all. Her eyes looked up into his, and if she had been a kitten she would have purred.

'How did you like my fried fish and hot biscuits, Big Buck?' she asked, lazy and slow. 'How was they, Big Buck?'

'The cooking's mighty good,' he said. 'I ain't never had nothing as good as that was before.'

The wind blew the door almost shut. There was only a little narrow crack left. Jimson and Moses stood up and looked at the yellow lamplight shining through the crack. After that they went to the gap in the fence and made their way to the big road. Every once in a while they could hear Singing Sal laugh out loud. They sat down in the ditch and waited. There wasn't anything else they could do.

They had to wait a long time before Big Buck came out of the house. The moon had come up and moved half-way across the sky, and the dew had settled so heavy on them that they shivered as bad as if they had fallen in the creek.

They jumped up when Big Buck came stumbling over the woodpile and through the gap in the fence.

From the door of the house a long shaft of yellow lamplight shone across the yard. Singing Sal was crouched behind the door with only her head sticking out.

'What you boys hanging around here for?' Big Buck said. 'Come on and get going.'

They started down the hill, Big Buck striking out in front and Jimson and Moses running along beside him to keep up with him.

They were half-way down the hill and Big Buck hadn't said a word since they left the front of the house. Jimson and Moses ran along, trying to keep up with him, so they would hear anything he said about courting Singing Sal. Any man who had gone and courted Singing Sal right in her own house ought to be full of things to say.

They hung on, hoping he would say something any minute. It wasn't so bad trying to keep up with him going downhill.

When they got to the bottom of the hill where the road crossed the creek, Big Buck stopped and turned around. He looked back up at the top of the hill where Singing Sal lived, and drew in a long deep breath. Jimson and Moses crowded around him to hear if he said anything.

'Them was the finest pout-mouthed perches I ever ate in all my life,' Big Buck said slowly. 'My, oh, my! Them fried fish, and all them hot biscuits was the best eating I ever done, My, oh, my! That coloured gal sure can cook!'

Big Buck hitched up his pants and started across the

bridge. It was a long way back to the swamp and the sun was getting ready to come up.

'My, oh, my!' he said, swinging into his stride

Jimson and Moses ran along beside him, doing their best to keep up.

HANDY

NOBODY knew where Handy came from, and nobody knew where he would go if he left, but if he had not killed Grandpa Price, he could have stayed another ten years or more.

Grandpa Price was old, and he was peevish, and he did nothing but fuss and find fault all day long. If he had been let alone, he would not have lived much longer, anyway.

But Handy hit Grandpa Price with a windlass, and the old man died that night. Handy had to pack up the little that belonged to him and get ready to go somewhere else to live.

'You ought to have had better sense,' Harry Munford told him.

'It wasn't sense that had to do with it,' Handy said.

'Just the same, it wasn't a good thing to do.'

'A man oughtn't be an out-and-out troublemaker,' Handy said. 'People who spend their lives building things don't have time to find fault with others.'

'Even so,' Harry said, 'you shouldn't have done what you did to Grandpa Price.'

A whole day could be spent counting up the downright

trouble-making things Grandpa Price had said and done during the past ten or fifteen years. When he ran out of the ordinary things to find fault with, such as not enough gravy on the chicken or too much sweetening in the custard, he would go around quarrelling about the time of day it happened to be. Sometimes when it was morning he would say it ought to be afternoon, and when it was noon he would say it ought to be dawn, and then rant and rave if anybody said noon was as good as anything else for it to be. Only a few days before he died, he got after Harry because the chimney might not be in plumb. That made Harry so mad he almost lost his head. 'What if it ain't?' he shouted at the old man. 'Because if it ain't, it ought to be,' Grandpa Price said. Harry was so mad by then that he went for a plumb line and dropped it on the chimney. The chimney was only an eighth of an inch out of plumb. 'That ought to make you shut your mouth from now on!' Harry shouted at him. 'I won't shut my mouth, because the chimney is out of plumb and you know it. It ought to be torn down and built up again right,' Grandpa Price said. 'Over my dead body,' Harry told him. Grandpa Price fussed about the chimney being out of plumb all the rest of the day, and even through supper until he went to bed that night. He called Harry and all the Munfords lazy, good-for-nothing, and slipshod. He followed Harry round the place the next day saying anybody who would take up for an out-of-plumb chimney was not a good citizen.

'The more I think about it, Handy, the more I think you shouldn't have done it,' Harry said. 'Any number of times I've felt like picking up a brick or a crowbar and doing the thing myself, but a man can't go round the world hitting old men like that, no matter how provoked he is. The law's against it.'

'I just couldn't stand it no longer, Mr. Harry,' Handy said. 'I'm sorry about it now, but it just couldn't be helped at the time.'

Handy had lived there ten or twelve years. When he walked into the front yard for the first time, it was in the middle of the cotton-picking season. He came in and said he was looking for something to do. It was at a time when Harry needed cotton pickers if he ever needed them. He was glad to see anybody who came up and said he wanted a job. Harry was all ready to hire Handy. He told Handy he was paying sixty cents a hundred in the fields.

Handy shook his head as though he knew exactly what he wanted. Cotton picking was not it. 'No sirree, bob. I don't pick no cotton,' Handy said. 'I haven't got any need for anybody else these days,' Harry told him. 'The cotton is falling on the ground, going to waste faster every day, and that's all I'm concerned about now.' 'You always got need for something new, or something made of something old.' 'What do you mean?' 'I make things,' Handy said. 'I just take what's thrown away and make it useful. Sometimes I like to make a thing just because it's pretty, though.'

He picked up a stick of wood about a foot long and two or three inches thick. Nobody paid much attention to what he was doing, and Harry was sizing him up to be a tramp. He asked Handy if he had ever worked in the fields, and Handy said he had not. He asked him if he had worked on the river steamers, and Handy said, No. In the cotton mills. Not ever. Railroads. No. Harry shook his head. He put Handy down a tramp. Handy scraped the wood with the knife blade and handed it to Harry. It was the smoothest-whittled wooden spoon anybody had ever seen. It looked as if it had been sandpapered and polished with soapstone. It had taken Handy only the length of time he

was standing there to do it, too. Harry turned the spoon over and over in his hands, felt of it, and smiled at Handy. Anybody who could do a thing like that deserved a better jack-knife than Handy had. Harry took his own out of his pocket and gave it to him.

Nobody said anything more to him about picking cotton in the fields. Handy walked round the yard looking at things for a while, and then he went round to the back of the house and looked inside the barn, the woodshed, the smokehouse, and the chicken run. He looked in all the hen nests, and then he began carving nest-eggs out of some blocks of wood he found in the barn. They were smooth and brown, and the laying hens liked them better than any other kind.

After he had made six or eight nest-eggs, he found something else to do. He never asked Harry or anybody if it was all right for him to do a thing or if they wanted something made; he just went ahead and made whatever he felt like doing. The chairs Handy made were the most comfortable in the house, the ploughstocks were the strongest on the farm, and the weather-vanes were the prettiest in the country.

'The trouble with Grandpa Price, he wasn't like me and you, Handy,' Harry said. 'The reason me and you are alike is that I crave to get things growing in the fields, and you to make things with your hands. Grandpa Price didn't have that feeling in him. All he wanted was to find fault with what other people grow or make.'

Handy was sad and dejected. He knew it would take him a long time to find another place where the people would let him stay and make things. He would be able to stop along the road now and then, of course, and make a chicken coop for somebody or build a pig-pen; but as soon as he finished it, they would give him a left-over meal or

a pair of old pants and tell him to go on away. He knew all about the trouble he was going to have finding somebody who would let him stay and just make things. Some of them would offer him a job ploughing; in the fields or working on a river steamer. 'I want to make things out of pieces of wood,' Handy said. 'I want to build things with my fingers.' The people were going to back away from him; they would shut the door in his face. He could not sit still. His hands began to tremble.

'What's the matter, Handy?' Harry asked him. 'What makes you shake like that? Don't let what happened to Grandpa Price untie you.'

'It's not that, it's something else.'

'What else?'

'I'm going to find it hard not having a place to live where I can make things.'

'I hate like everything to see you go,' Harry said. 'Somehow or other it don't seem right at all.' It hurt him so much to think about Handy's leaving that he tried not to look at him. 'But,' he said, 'the sheriff will make it hard for me if I fail to tell him what happened.' It was already the day after Grandpa Price had died, and the sheriff had to be told about it before Grandpa Price could be buried in the cemetery. 'But I don't want to do it, just the same,' Harry said sadly. 'It means driving you off, Handy, and I'd drive you off a dozen times before I'd let the sheriff find you here when he comes.'

It hurt Harry so much to think about it he could not sit there and look at Handy. He got up and walked away by himself.

When he came back, Handy was not there. But presently he saw Handy's head bobbing up and down behind the barn fence, and he was relieved. After a while he went into the house to change into clean overalls and shirt. He

had to change before he could go into town, anyway. There was nothing to stop him from taking as much time as he wanted, though. He looked at two or three pairs of overalls before deciding which to put on. He liked to have a person like Handy around, because Handy was always making something or getting ready to make something. That was what he liked about Handy. He was like the children when they came home from school or on holidays. They were busy at something, play or work, every minute they were awake. He was afraid, though, that when they grew up they would get to be like Grandpa Price, that they would spend their time finding fault instead of making things.

When Harry finally came out into the yard, it was late in the afternoon.

'I don't like to go to town at this time of the day,' he said, looking toward the barn where Handy was, up at the sky, and back again toward the barn. 'It would mean coming back long after dark.'

Harry walked round the house, to the garden several times, and finally toward the barnyard. He wondered more and more all the time what Handy was spending so much time down there for. Several times he had seen Handy come to the barn door, throw some trash and shavings outside, and then disappear again.

It grew dark soon, and he did not see Handy again until the next morning. Handy was at the table eating breakfast when Harry came in and sat down.

'What's this?' Harry asked, standing up again suddenly.

'A little present for Grandpa Price,' Handy said.

'But Grandpa Price is dead——'

'I only made it to hang around his neck in the grave,' Handy said. 'I always wanted to make something for him, but I thought he'd find so much fault with it if he was alive

that I went ahead and made it all wrong just to please him."

It was a wooden chain about two feet long, each link about the size of a fingernail, and each one a different object. Handy had carved it from beginning to end since the afternoon before, sitting up all night to finish it.

'If Grandpa Price was alive, he'd be so tickled to get it he wouldn't want to find any fault with it, Handy. As it is, I don't know that I've ever seen a finer-looking present.'

Harry sat down and picked up the chain to look at it more closely. The first link he looked at was a miniature chair with three legs shorter than the fourth one.

'I didn't think anybody but me remembered about that time when Grandpa Price quarrelled so much about one of the chairs having one leg shorter than the others. I said one leg was shorter. Grandpa Price said three were short and one was long. Up to that time, that was about the biggest quarrel me and him ever had, wasn't it, Handy?'

Handy nodded.

Harry bent over to see what some of the other objects were. One was carved to look like a piece of the sky with the sun and stars shining at the same time. Another was a picture in a frame that looked upside down no matter which way it was turned.

Handy pushed back his chair and got up.

'This is too fine a thing to put in a grave, Handy,' Harry said. 'It would be a sin to bury a thing like this in the ground where nobody could ever see it again.'

'I made it for a present to hang round Grandpa Price's neck,' Handy said. 'That's why I made it.'

'Well,' Harry said, shaking his head, 'that being the case—I guess you've got the right to say—— But it does seem a shame.'

Handy went out through the kitchen, down the steps

and across the yard to the barn. As soon as he got inside the barn door, he fired the shotgun.

Harry jumped to his feet, carrying the chain for Grandpa Price's neck with him.

'What did Handy shoot for?' he said.

He looked out the window for a minute, then he went down to the barn.

When he came back, he was slow about it. He looked sad, but there was another look on his face at the same time. One moment he felt so good he had to grin about it. 'Handy won't have to go now, after all.' He grinned all over his face. 'If Handy had stayed alive, I'd never have seen him again,' he said to himself. He walked up on the porch and began looking at the chain again, picking out a link here and a link there to stare at and feel with his fingers.

'Grandpa Price can be buried in the cemetery if he wants to,' he said aloud, 'but Handy is going to be buried right here in the backyard.'

He felt the chain with all the fingers of both hands and held it up to gaze at in the sunlight.

'I want to have him around,' he said.

THE DAY THE PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE CAME TO CIUDAD TAMAULIPAS

THE presidential candidate's special train was due to arrive from Monterey at nine o'clock, and it was expected to come into the station at eleven. The track was in poor condition farther west, but the General had taken that into consideration and had started the journey three hours ahead of schedule in order to arrive in Ciudad Tamaulipas not more than two hours late.

Three weeks earlier one of the other candidates had made the fatal mistake of not thinking about the poor condition of the track, merely leaving Monterey on schedule. Consequently, he arrived in Ciudad Tamaulipas five hours late, and by that time all the people had decided to go home and eat and take the siesta.

The bands, cheated out of their opportunity to play three weeks before, were practising all over town that morning. They had been up since sunrise. Three of them, along with some of the shoeshine boys and lottery-ticket vendors, were marching up and down in the dusty arroyo behind the bull-ring.

In the plaza two more bands were practising bars and scales and getting a feeling for the pitch. Several other bands were riding through the streets in trucks and practising at the same time.

The special train bearing the General and his party suddenly puffed up to the station, the engineer tooting the whistle a long and two shorts only when it was a mere dozen rail-lengths away. Everybody was caught unprepared. It had arrived an hour and a half late, but a full thirty minutes before it was expected.

As it was, the only persons on the station platform when the General's train puffed up and stopped were some shoeshine boys and lottery-ticket vendors, and they would have been there even if the special had not been coming that day at all.

The official welcoming committee was still in the cantina two blocks away, and the chauffeur of the limousine in which the General was to ride to the bull-ring for the speech was sitting comfortably in a restaurant across the street eating fried beans. The limousine itself, however, was parked at the station platform.

The General and his party bought up all lottery tickets on which the numeral 5 appeared in the serial numbers and went directly to the limousine. Somebody blew the horn three sharp blasts. The chauffeur came running out of the restaurant with his mouth full of hot beans, thinking somebody was playing with it. When he recognized the General on the back seat, he swallowed the beans, saluted, and slid under the steering wheel.

News of the General's arrival had already begun to spread through the town. Shopkeepers began pulling down the steel blinds over their plate-glass windows, expecting the crowds to jam the streets at any moment.

One of the bands in the plaza heard the news and

opened up right away, the bandsmen pulling out all the stops in their instruments so the sound would carry four blocks across town to the station, where the General could hear and appreciate it.

But before the music reached the General's ears, he and his party were off in a burst of scudding speed and billowy dust. Six of his rangers, who could not find space inside the limousine, clung to the outside along with five or six shoeshine boys, several lottery-ticket vendors, and a delegate from an *ejido*, who happened to be at the station early because he had misjudged the time.

Half-way to the bull-ring a shoeshine boy and the *ejido* delegate fell off when the limousine struck a bounce in the street.

When the General arrived at the bull-ring there were seven or eight thousand men in the stands, filling them to capacity, and two or three thousand more were on the outside trying vainly to gain entrance by scaling the adobe walls and tunnelling with their machetes under the concrete stands.

Just as he and his party were about to enter the bull-ring a squad of soldiers that had been detailed to protect the life of the presidential candidate came forward and forcibly disarmed his rangers, taking all their automatics and dumping them into a canvas sack.

The rangers resented the attitude of the soldiers, who were comrades of the revolution, too, but the General laughed and beckoned to half a dozen of the prettiest girls round him. He requested the girls to precede him through the passageway, and then they all entered the bull-ring together. The rangers stayed behind and argued with the soldiers while all of them took advantage of the opportunity to get their shoes shined and buy some lottery tickets.

The General mounted the platform that had been erected in the middle of the bull-ring while an *ejido* delegate was delivering an introductory speech to the crowd over the loudspeaker system. When the people recognized the General, their voices drowned out the words of the delegate and he had to resign himself to leaving his speech half unread.

As the clamour was dying down, two bands arrived and began playing as they marched around the platform several times. In the meantime several shoeshine boys and lottery-ticket vendors made a dash for the platform, making it safely while everyone's attention was being held by the performance of the band.

After a while there was less noise and commotion, and the General went to the microphone and greeted the people. He was able to speak only a few words before the shouting of the crowd made it impossible to continue.

'What did the General say?' we asked one of the lottery-ticket vendors beside us.

'The General said it has made him happy to be here, because now he has seen the most beautiful girls and the strongest men in all Mexico!'

After a while the General was able to resume his address. He spoke one full sentence and half of another into the microphone before the shouts of the people again drowned out his voice.

'*Viva el General!*'

'*Viva Mexico!*'

'*Viva el General!*'

In wave after wave the shouts of many thousands of voices thundered through the bull-ring.

'What did the General say?' we asked excitedly.

'The General said it has made him happy to come here where all the land is rich and fertile—even the mountain-

sides!' the lottery-ticket vendor said, excitedly waving his arms in a gesture that took in the whole world.

Just as the General was getting ready to attempt to speak again, two more bands arrived. They began playing the marches they knew, circling the platform time after time. While they were playing, the arena gates suddenly burst open and dozens of men on horseback swarmed across the bull-ring. They were carrying banners of the revolution and flags of the republic, but they had no musical instruments, and soon nobody noticed them any more.

There was a period of comparative calm in the bull-ring, and the General stepped briskly to the microphone and spoke rapidly to the people. This time he completed two sentences before the crowd's shouts of approval stilled his voice once more. He stepped back, wiped his face, and waited patiently for the din to subside.

'What did he say this time?' we asked eagerly.

'The General said he wished all the people in the world could have the good fortune to come to Ciudad Tamaulipas!'

During an unaccountable lull, the General hurried back to the microphone, but before he could utter any sound another band arrived and struck up its music as it began circling the platform. When it was all over, the General grasped the microphone firmly in both hands and quickly resumed his speech. This time he raced through several sentences before the swelling roar of the crowd forced him to pause.

'*Viva el General!*'

'*Viva Mexico!*'

'*Viva el General!*'

The clamour lasted for a long time and the vendors around us had joined in so enthusiastically that it

was several minutes before we could secure anyone's attention.

'What did the General say that pleased the people so much?'

The lottery-ticket vendor gripped us excitedly by the arm, shouting into our ears.

'The General said it is a beautiful day!'

In the excitement of the moment we had failed to be aware that one of the shoeshine boys was polishing our shoes, and he startled us by raising his voice and repeating what the General had said. We looked up into the cloudless, pale blue, desert sky. It was one of the most beautiful days we had ever seen in Mexico. The sun beamed down upon us like the smile of a benevolent friend, warming us to the core. We stood there in its kindly glow, feeling in the depths of our hearts that no truer words had ever before been uttered. There in the heat and clamour, breathing deeply of the pungent aroma of the scorched desert sand, we repeated to ourselves the hope that the General, who had made us aware of the beauty of the day, would secure all the votes and become the next president of his country.

AN EVENING IN NUEVO LEON

It was ten o'clock in the starlit desert evening when we drove into Nuevo Leon. After winding through the adobe-walled streets for a while we found the hotel and stopped in front of the entrance. There were few persons out that late, and the only sounds we could hear were the gurgling of the fountain in the plaza across the street and the desert breeze in the tall palms, making a sound like rustling taffeta.

While we were taking some of our things from the car, the proprietor of the hotel came out bowing and smiling. He helped us with a couple of the bags and led us into the lobby.

'It is an honour to have you come into my hotel,' he said, stopping in the centre of the lobby and bowing again. 'I am very pleased to have you as my guests. The Reforma Hotel is honoured.'

We smiled in return. It made us feel good to be welcomed in such a manner.

The proprietor backed behind the desk. Then he placed the register in front of me and handed me the freshly dipped pen.

'The house is yours, señor,' he said graciously. 'Have you been long in Mexico?'

We were tired and dusty and far from being in a talkative mood. It had been a hard trip across the desert and mountains from the coast. Although the distance was less than three hundred miles, it had taken us since five that morning to reach Nuevo Leon.

I scrawled my name on the register, adding 'y Sra.' On the next line I wrote out my wife's maiden name in full.

The proprictor leaned over the register and looked at the two entries closely.

'The señorita?' he inquired, looking at us.

'There are only two of us,' I said, indicating my wife and myself.

He bent over the register, this time taking out his glasses and perching them on his nose. After several moments he straightened up and removed the glasses, shaking his head emphatically.

'No, señor,' he said unsmilingly.

My wife nudged me with elbow.

'Here is how it is, señor,' I spoke up. 'I signed my name, and added "y Sra." for my wife. Then on this next line I wrote out my wife's name in full, her professional name. That was to make everything plain.'

'But where is the señorita?' he asked, unshaken. 'I did not see her arrive here at the hotel with you.' He looked at my wife and me, counting us on two figures of his hand. 'Where is the señorita?'

'There is no señorita,' I said quickly. 'My wife and the señorita are the one and same person.'

A broad smile lighted the proprietor's face.

'That is wonderful!' he said, bowing to my wife.

'What is?' I asked.

'You and the señorita are to be married! It is wonderful!'

My wife and I leaned wearily against the desk. It was

almost eleven o'clock by then and we had been up since four that morning. We were envious of all the other guests in the Reforma who had long since retired.

'Señor, let me explain,' I began. 'It is a custom of us crazy Norteamericanos. When a man's wife has a professional name, we sometimes sign both her married name and her professional name at a time like this. She may be receiving telegrams under both names.'

'No, señor,' he spoke up. 'That is impossible.'

'Why?' I asked.

'The telegraph office is closed.'

'Never mind, then,' I said, glancing at my wife. She had dropped her head wearily on the desk. 'We don't want to receive any telegrams tonight, anyway. Just give us a room and let us go to sleep.'

The proprietor nodded his head gravely.

'It is all right now,' he said. 'I misunderstood. I offer my apologies. I am very sorry. I will now give you two rooms where you may retire to sleep immediately.'

My wife raised her head from the desk.

'One room,' she said sleepily.

'That is impossible,' he said sternly.

My wife's head dropped back into the comfort of her arms on the desk.

'Why is it impossible?' I asked.

'I cannot give you one room, because you and the señorita may not sleep together in the Reforma Hotel. It is impossible. I will give you two separate rooms, señor y señorita.'

My wife held up her hand, showing him her wedding ring. He looked at it uncertainly.

'We have been married for only seven long, long years, señor,' she said wearily.

'My apologies, señora,' he said gravely. 'I am deeply

humiliated by my behaviour. I offer you my apologies time and time again.'

My wife and I backed away, relieved. After we had gone half-way to the stairs we turned and discovered that the proprietor was still behind the desk. He was bent over the register, with his glasses perched on his nose again, reading the entries I had made.

'There has been a serious mistake,' the proprietor said, looking at us accusingly. 'Señora, your husband has not yet arrived at the hotel. When do you expect him?'

My wife and I looked at each other confusedly.

'What are you talking about?' she said, going back to the desk. 'This is my husband here, señor!'

He looked at the names written on the register once more. Then he straightened up, shaking his head sternly.

'It is impossible,' he said.

'Why?' she asked.

'Your husband has not yet registered at the Reforma Hotel. When he arrives, he must sign his name in the book before he may share your room with you, señora.'

He looked at us more sternly than ever.

'What in the world are we going to do?' my wife asked perplexedly, turning to me.

'I don't know,' I told her. 'I don't know what we can do.'

While we stood there, the proprietor took two keys from the rack behind the desk and led the way to the stairs. We followed in silence, fearing to utter a word even in whisper.

When we reached the hall on the second floor, the proprietor unlocked a door and bowed my wife into the room. Before I could follow her inside he stepped into the doorway, blocking my entrance.

'No, señor,' he said, shaking his head at me. 'It is impossible.'

I could see my wife standing on tiptoes looking at me over his shoulder. She was speechless.

Dropping the luggage, I went up to him.

'Let me explain once more, señor,' I began, trying my best to conceal my impatience. 'We are married to each other. My wife is wearing her wedding ring. We wish to enter our room and retire for the night. We are very tired. We drove all the way across the desert from the coast today.'

He turned and looked at my wife. She gazed at him appealingly.

After several moments of indecision, he shrugged his shoulders and stepped aside, bowing deeply.

'I must apologize for my error,' he said. 'Sometimes I do not always understand the customs of the Norteamericanos. Please accept my apologies.'

He bowed backward down the hall until he reached the stairway. I ran into the room, shut the door, and locked it securely before anything further could happen.

We stood at the door listening to his footsteps until we were certain he had gone down to the lobby.

It was not long before we were startled by a sudden rapping on the door. We waited, holding our breath. After a moment the knocking began again, louder than before. It could not be ignored after that.

'Who is it?' I shouted in the darkness.

'I am the proprietor, señor,' he said. 'Please open the door immediately.'

'Don't do it,' my wife said. 'We'll never get any sleep tonight if we have to argue with him again.'

'But he may break down the door,' I said.

'Let him break it down,' she said wearily. 'It's his door.'

We were quiet, not making another sound.

The renewed knocking shook the whole building. It continued unceasingly.

'We may as well find out what he wants,' I said. 'We can't sleep with that going on.'

'Don't let him start another argument, whatever you do,' my wife said. 'Tell him it is too late to argue now, but that we will argue with him in the morning after breakfast.'

I turned on the light.

'What do you want, señor?' I asked at last.

'The door must be opened immediately,' he said, raising his voice above the knocking.

I got up and unlocked the door. The proprietor stood in the doorway. He did not cross the threshold.

'It is impossible!' he said excitedly.

'What's impossible?' I asked.

'You may not sleep with the señorita!' he said loudly.

'Oh, my goodness!' my wife cried. 'He's started that again!'

I could hear doors opening along the hall. Everybody in the hotel had been aroused by the clamour.

'Look here!' I said crossly. 'I am not sleeping with a señorita! This is my wife!'

'It is impossible!' he said, raising his voice above mine.

'Why is it impossible?' I shouted.

'You must occupy a separate room, señor!' he commanded. 'Tomorrow you may become married to the señorita, if she wishes to be married, and then tomorrow night you will not be required to occupy separate rooms. But tonight you must!'

I glanced toward my wife helplessly.

'What are we going to do?' I asked.

'Goodness knows,' she said. 'Won't he listen to reason at all?'

I turned round and faced the proprietor, opening my mouth to speak. Before I could utter a sound he had already spoken.

'It is impossible, señor,' he said, pushing himself between me and the room.

I found myself being directed down the hall, past several persons standing sleepily in the doorways of their rooms. He opened a door and turned on the light.

'Please accept my apologies, señor,' he said, bowing low. 'It is to my deep regret. But it was impossible.'

He closed the door, quickly turning the key in the lock on the outside. After he had withdrawn it, I heard him walking briskly down the hall to the stairway.

UNCLE JEFF

UNCLE Jeff was a pretty good all-round carpenter, and he could drive a tenpenny nail into a board without making hammer marks on the wood, but he had been lazy ever since he was a boy, and he did not work at his trade any more than he was compelled to.

'All of those Newsomes are lazy,' people said, 'and it's unfair to single out Jeff for not being an exception.'

Uncle Jeff's wife, though, never let up scolding him for being so downright lazy. Aunt Annie said he was too lazy to turn over in bed when he got tired sleeping on one side, and that she had to do it for him so he would stop moaning and go back to sleep.

But more than that, she had said a hundred times, if she had said it once, that she was going to leave him if he did not change his ways. Every time that came up, Uncle Jeff put his arm round her and promised to do every single thing she wanted him to do. When he said that, Aunt Annie usually weakened and said she would stay.

'I don't know what got into me,' Aunt Annie said. 'When I was young, I had the chance of marrying some of the finest men in town. I turned them all down for you, Jeff Newsome.'

'Now, Annie,' Uncle Jeff told her, 'that's no way to look at it. You must have had a pretty good reason for marrying me when you did.'

'Maybe I did then,' she said, 'but I've got more sense now, and I wouldn't do it again.'

'I've tried to be a good husband to you, Annie,' Uncle Jeff said. 'I may make mistakes sometimes, but I mean well.'

When Uncle Jeff talked like that, Aunt Annie could not keep back the tears. She had a good cry and did not scold him again for another week or ten days.

The boarders always noticed the difference after Aunt Annie and Uncle Jeff had had one of their talks up in her room. At supper she always picked out the best pieces of meat for Uncle Jeff's plate, and she gave him an extra large helping of dessert. That period lasted, generally, for two or three days; then she would begin scolding him for little things for another two or three days; and then toward the end she found fault with everything he did or did not do, and Uncle Jeff was in for another bawling out.

During those times when Aunt Annie was not speaking to him, Uncle Jeff told one or two of the boarders that toothache or a sneezing spell had kept her awake all night, and that if she appeared to be out of sorts, just not to pay any attention to it.

That was when Uncle Jeff usually went away from home for a day or two, sometimes three days at a time. He figured that Aunt Annie would appreciate him more when he came back. Sometimes she did and sometimes she did not.

When Uncle Jeff left home, he caught a ride in a truck or automobile to Savannah and stayed with a friend of his. There was nothing wrong with his doing that, because Emma's house, where he stayed, was clean and orderly. It

did not have a bad reputation like some of the houses had. He had known Emma for a long time, for fifteen or eighteen years at least, and Emma treated him like a favourite brother. She had partitioned off the right wing of the house for private use, and Uncle Jeff was always welcome to sleep in the guest room.

Every time he went to visit Emma, he wondered what would happen if the house were raided while he happened to be there. He was fairly certain that Emma saw to it that things were taken care of in the proper places, but none the less there was always a chance of a slip somewhere, and if that ever did happen, he was just as sure that he would be taken to the police station with Emma and the girls and booked. He did not mind that, but he was thinking what a shock it would be to Annie for her to see his name in the paper that way, and wondering what he would say if it ever happened.

'Another spat, Jeff?' Emma asked him when she opened the door. 'It's been less than two weeks this time, hasn't it?'

'About the same as usual,' he said. 'Annie's got me worried good and plenty this time about her leaving me, though. She says it like she means it.'

He went inside, and Emma took him through the hall to the dining-room, where she was eating supper. She brought a plate for him, and she helped him to the baked fish and vegetables.

'Annie won't leave you, Jeff,' she said, patting him on the shoulder. 'Don't let her talk upset you. A woman isn't going to drive a man out, or go away herself, unless it's something like the world coming to an end. You and Annie won't fall out that bad.'

After supper they talked a while in the dining-room, and then Uncle Jeff took the evening paper and went upstairs to bed. Emma brought him a cold bottle of beer, and

an extra pillow for his head while he was reading, and turned the covers back.

'My husband spoiled me something awful,' Emma said as she was bending over the bed smoothing the sheets. 'Before he died he used to let me take care of him like a baby. I've never got used to it since.'

Jeff turned around to answer her, thinking she was talking to him, but after he had taken one look at her, he realized she was talking to herself. He watched her while she folded the covers back and smoothed them out several times until she was satisfied with the way they looked. After that she patted and pushed the two pillows around until she had them just right. When she finished, she opened the bottle of beer and poured it into a glass for him. He walked to the window and looked outside.

She had gone as far as the door before he knew she was leaving. He turned around and thanked her for bringing him the bottle of beer.

Emma did not say anything for a moment, and then she came back into the middle of the room.

'I'd hate to have you stop coming here, Jeff,' she began. There was a long pause while she seemed to be thinking what to say next. 'But I've been wondering about something.'

'What?' he asked.

'How would you like to find a way to make you and Annie stop having these spats—something that would put you back where you were when you got married?'

'How would you do that?' he asked quickly.

'I think I know a way,' she said, looking at him and nodding her head slowly. She put her hand against her face absent-mindedly. 'I think I know just what would do it.'

'What is it?' he asked. 'How do you go about it?'

'Annie needs jolting, Jeff,' she said. 'A good, hard, teeth-rattling jolt.'

'You don't mean for me to go home and shake her hard or hit her, do you?'

'No,' she said. 'Of course not.'

'How can she be jolted then?'

'I have a pretty good idea in my mind,' she said. 'But I'm not going to tell you now. You're going to stay innocent of the whole thing. This is something just between Annie and me.'

She turned and walked out of the room, closing the door behind her. Uncle Jeff stood staring at the door, wondering what in the world Emma was talking about. He heard her go down the stairs and heard a door slam in the hall on the first floor. After wondering about what she had said for a while, he gave up finally and started undressing. When he was ready to get into bed, he picked up the evening paper and propped up against the pillows Emma had fixed for him. He always liked to read before going to sleep.

It was early in the evening, not much more than nine-thirty, and the house was quiet. Far in the other wing of the building he could hear a radio faintly, and occasionally one of the girls laughed loud enough for him to hear.

Half an hour later the light was out and he was sound asleep.

Suddenly in the middle of the night he sat up in bed, shaking and perspiring. He had had a terrible dream. He jumped out of bed, turned on the light, and looked at the room to see where he was. He did not waste any more time standing there.

Jerking on his clothes the easiest way they would go on he turned out the light and opened the door cautiously. He could not hear anyone downstairs, and so he tiptoed

down the hall and out the private door into the alley. Even when he got there, he did not feel safe. He walked on his toes to the end of the alley and when he got there he stopped and looked carefully in all directions before going any farther. He did not see anyone, and he walked away as fast as he could.

Uncle Jeff did not know what time of night it was until he had got to the edge of the city. When he was outside the light cast by the last street lamp, he took out his watch, struck a match, and looked at the time. It was still early, only a quarter-past one. He started walking toward home without any waste of time.

There were not many trucks on the highway at that time of night, and Uncle Jeff was beginning to be afraid he would not get a ride at all. It was a long distance home, sixty-five or seventy miles, and he would never be able to walk it before morning. He looked behind him every few yards to see if there were any sign of a truck or automobile.

While he walked along the dark, hard highway toward the north, he began to wonder if it were possible for a person to dream what he had not been able to think of while he was awake. He decided it would not be possible, for him at least, because he was sure that his dream about Emma was going to come true. He was so certain about it that he told himself that his waking up was the best piece of luck he had ever had in his whole life. He was not angry with Emma, because he knew she meant well, but he was just as certain in his own mind that the scheme he thought she had planned would do him ten times more harm than good. He whistled over every step of ground for the next two miles.

Three hours later he stopped and built a fire in the ditch beside the highway to warm his hands and feet. Automobiles passed him, and trucks too, but none of them had

stopped to give him a ride. He did not mind that this time, because he was so glad to be out of Savannah and on his way back home that he did not care if he had to walk every step of the way there.

He huddled over the fire warming himself until the last embers had died out. Then he got up, stretched himself comfortably, and started walking toward home.

It was after daylight before he finally got a ride in a truck, and it was mid-morning before he reached the house. He walked around the block once before going in. There was no reason for his doing that this morning, but the habit was more than he could overcome in one day.

Aunt Annie was in the dining-room setting the table for dinner when he walked in the front door. He hung his hat on the hat-tree the boarders used and walked down the hall. When he passed the dining-room door, he saw Aunt Annie standing by the table looking at him. She did not say a word then.

'Hello, Annie, darling,' Uncle Jeff said. 'It's a fine spring day outside today, isn't it?'

She did not answer him.

He walked cautiously to the door.

'What's the matter, Annie darling?' he said.

She was holding the morning paper in her hands behind her back. Suddenly she drew her arm up as though she were fighting mosquitoes and slammed the paper on the table. Then she took several steps toward Uncle Jeff. Uncle Jeff backed into the hall.

'Of all the humiliating, scandalous, low-down——' she began.

'What is?' he asked anxiously.

'This!' she cried, beating the newspaper against the palm of her hand. 'What will my boarders think of me? How long do you think the schoolteachers will be allowed

to board in my house after this? What will the respectable, honest, God-fearing citizens of this town think of me after this? How can I walk along the street and hold my head up now? Oh, why did I ever marry you in the first place!'

Uncle Jeff stared at her in amazement.

'What happened, Annie?' he asked.

She took one more look at him, gripped the paper in both hands, and marched to the stairs. She stopped there for a moment, looked at him again before bursting into tears, and then ran upstairs to her room. She slammed the door shut but did not lock it. Uncle Jeff went up the stairs behind her and walked noiselessly into the room. She had thrown herself across the bed, on her face, and she was crying hysterically. Once during the time he stood not knowing what to do, she turned her face and looked to see if he were in the room. As soon as she saw him, she turned her face away again and cried.

Uncle Jeff sat down on the bed beside her and tried to ease the newspaper out of her hand. When she felt it move, she gripped it so tight he could not get it from her.

'Now, Annie,' Uncle Jeff begged, 'you ought to tell me what all the trouble is about.'

Aunt Annie sat up and glared at him. The tears were dripping down her cheeks and disappearing into the fabric of the counterpane.

'Why did you do it, Jeff?' she asked at last, weakly and hopelessly. 'Oh, Jeff, why did you?'

'Do what?' he said. 'Why did I do what?'

'Go to that house in Savannah and be arrested and have your name printed in the paper like this,' she said quickly. 'You have deceived me, Jeff. You have done this to me—brought all this pain and humiliation to me.'

'I didn't get arrested, Annie,' he said confusedly.

She opened the paper and read aloud how the police had raided a house on Webster Street and had arrested Emma Weeks, nine girls, and a man who gave the name of Jeff Newsome.

When she finished, she looked at Uncle Jeff curiously.

Uncle Jeff shook his head bewilderedly.

'Did you go to Savannah?' she asked coldly.

'Yes, but——'

'Did you go to Emma Weeks's house on Webster Street?'

'Yes, I went there, but——'

Aunt Annie closed her lips tightly while he was trying to explain. Each time she spoke, she opened her mouth only enough to pronounce the words.

'Were you arrested and taken to jail?'

'I dreamed about it,' he said in confusion. 'I dreamed I was in jail. But I wasn't arrested at all or put in jail.'

'You're lying as big as the broad daylight, Jeff Newsome!' Aunt Annie said. 'You are sitting there telling me the biggest, blackest lie of your life! You got out on bail somehow, and now you sit there and lie to me about it. It looks to me like you would have sense enough to admit it when it's all here in the Savannah paper.'

Instead of trying to protest any more, he wondered how he would ever succeed in convincing anybody in town that he had not been arrested in the raid on Emma's house. He knew Emma well enough to figure out that she had had her own house raided in order to have him booked at the police station, and he knew now that she had done it in order to jolt Annie. He was convinced that when Emma discovered he had left her house, she had persuaded somebody to give his name to the police so her plan to jolt Annie could be carried out. Emma was smart enough to think that fast. And besides, Emma liked

to have her house raided every few months, anyway; it was the best advertising she could get.

Aunt Annie was looking at him coldly.

He did not know how to go about trying to explain the thing so she would believe him.

'Well, what have you got to say for yourself?' Aunt Annie demanded.

'Now, Annie,' he began, casting about in his mind for some method of handling the thing, 'it's not like you think it is. I didn't——'

Aunt Annie suddenly leaned forward and grasped Uncle Jeff's hand. Her face was flushed and there was a kind of softness in her eyes that he had not seen in a long time. She smiled at him, too.

'Jeff,' she said slowly, 'I haven't been a good wife to you lately. I don't know what got into me. I've done nothing but scold and find fault. Being like that has made me miserable, and I did more scolding trying to cover up how bad I felt. The last time I kicked you out of bed and made you sleep in another room I hated myself so much I wanted to die. I didn't tell you how I felt then, because I was all the time hating myself so much I couldn't admit it. But I can tell you now, because I feel——'

Her eyes were so soft they looked as if they would melt any second.

'Will you forgive me, Jeff?'

'Me? Forgive you?' he asked unbelievingly.

She nodded, holding his hand tightly.

'Well, I guess so,' he said, 'but——'

'Never mind saying any more, Jeff,' she said.

'But I don't know how to explain——'

'What kind of a woman is Emma Weeks, Jeff?' she broke in. 'How old is she? How long have you known her?'

Uncle Jeff settled back on the pillows Aunt Annie propped up for his head and wondered how Emma had known all this was going to turn out as it had in the end. The more he thought about it, the more confused he became. It was a mystery bigger than life itself to him.

Aunt Annie unlaced his shoes, lifted his feet on to the bed, and smiled down at him. Uncle Jeff wiggled his toes and waited for her to come into his arms. He had already decided it would be better if he never attempted to convince her that actually he had not been arrested in Emma's house and had not been booked with the girls at the police station.

THE MIDWINTER GUEST

It was the first time in his whole life that Orland Trask had done such a thing. Even Orland's wife could not say afterwards what had got into Orland to cause him to tell the strange man from the eastern country that he might remain in the house and stay for the night. And it was the last time. Both Orland and Emma knew better than to do a thing like that again.

The stranger from the eastern country knocked on the door that evening while Orland and his wife were eating supper. Orland heard him knock at the beginning, but he did not make an effort to get up from the table to answer a knocking on his door at supper-time.

'It's nobody I want dealings with,' Orland said to his wife. 'A man who would come knocking on a neighbour's door at mealtime hadn't ought to be listened to. Finns and Swedes are the only people I ever heard of who didn't have better sense.'

'Maybe some of the Morrises are sick, Orland,' Emma said. 'I'll go see.'

'Stay sat in your seat, woman. Even those Morrises have got better sense than to take to illness at mealtime.'

The knocking became louder. The man out there was

pounding on the storm door with a heavy oak walking-stick.

Orland's wife turned and looked out the window behind her. It was still snowing. The wind had died down with nightfall and the flakes were floating lightly against the panes.

The stranger at the door was impatient. He opened the storm door and banged on the panels of the house door and against the clapboards with the knotted end of his walking-stick, and then he turned and beat against the door with the heels of his studded boots. He was making a lot of noise out there for a stranger, more noise than Orland had ever heard at his door.

'I'll go see,' Emma said again, rising from her chair at the other end of the table.

'You stay sat in your seat, woman,' Orland told her.

Orland's wife sank back into the chair, but barely had she settled herself when suddenly the door burst open with a gust of snow and icy wind, and the strange man stood there glaring at them. He was wearing black leather breeches and a red-and-green mackinaw and a brown fur cap pulled so far down over his ears that only his eyes and nose were showing. Snow had clung to his eyelashes and had frozen in long thin icicles that reached almost to his mouth. He stomped and blew, knocking the snow from his boots and shaking it from his cap and mackinaw. The heavy oak walking-stick rapped as loudly as ever against the door sill. The man had not only entered the house, but the door was open and the frosty air blew inside.

Orland's back was turned to the door and the first that he knew of the man bursting in was when the icy blast of snow and wind struck him. His wife, Emma, had seen everything from the beginning, but she was afraid to say or to do anything until Orland turned round. She knew

that a man who would burst open a door would not wait to be asked into the room.

'Holy Mother,' the stranger who stood in the doorway muttered, 'the bones of my body are stiff as ice.'

He came into the room then, his mittens under his arm, and his hands full of snow that he had scooped from the doorstep. He shut the door with the heel of his boot and walked round the table at which Orland was sitting, and rubbed his hands with the new snow.

Orland had not said a word. He sat glaring at the heavily clothed man who had entered his house unbidden.

Emma asked the strange man, guardedly, if his hands were frozen. While she waited for him to answer, she glanced again at Orland.

'Holy Mother,' the stranger said again, 'the bones of my body are stiff as ice.'

He continued to rub the new snow over the backs of his hands and around his fingers. He still did not go near the heater in the corner.

'My name is Phelps,' he said, 'and I come from the eastern country of Maine. Down there the townsmen take in cold men from the frost at night.'

'Well,' Orland said, pushing back his chair from the table, 'the townsmen in this part of the State have got the sense to stay indoors when they have no good business out in a frosty night.'

Emma went to the door and brought back a bowl of new snow. She placed the bowl on the carpet in front of the stranger who had said his name was Phelps. He began to unlace his boots while Emma got ready to take away the supper dishes.

'Freeze your toes, too?' Orland said. 'Any man who would walk out and freeze his hands and feet ought to have them drop off with frostbite.'

Phelps removed his boots and socks and began rubbing his toes with the new snow.

'Am a poor man,' Phelps said, 'and I'm not a house-owner. My brother wrote me a letter to come over to New Hampshire and help him peel pulpwood. Started out walking, and I've got the high mountains yet to cross. Guess you will take me in and put me up for the night.'

Orland filled his pipe and struck a match before he answered. He then waited until Emma had gone into the kitchen again.

'The country would be a heap better off without fools like you walking through the snow and frost to New Hampshire in dead of winter, and it's my duty to turn you out and let the frost finish its job of freezing you. That's what I ought to do to a man who would come into a neighbour's house without asking. The country has got too many like you in it now. But my wife would take on if I was to turn you out, so I'll have to let you stay for the night. Will give you warning, though; the next time your brother writes you to come over to New Hampshire to help him peel pulpwood, it had better be before winter sets in. You won't get aid here again. Won't stand to have strangers coming into my house unbidden.'

Phelps took his feet out of the new snow and put them on the sheet of newspaper Orland's wife had spread for him. He made no effort to move or to thank Orland for permitting him to stay for the night. He just sat and stared at the snow falling against the window. He was an old man, much older than Orland. He looked to be at least eighty years old. His hair was almost white, but his body was firm and muscular. If he had been less than six feet tall, he would have appeared to be over weight.

Presently Emma came back into the room and carried out the bowl of melting snow and the damp newspaper,

and then she handed the old man a clean bath towel. He dried his hands and feet and put his socks and boots on again.

'Show me the place to sleep, and good-night,' he said wearily.

'Guess you will want the use of the spare chamber,' Orland said, scowling at the old man. 'Well, you're going to get it. Could give you some blankets and put you on the carpet, but I'm not. Am giving you the use of the spare chamber. My wife will fix you a plate of breakfast in the morning if you are in here on time. Nobody eats a breakfast in my house after six-thirty.'

Emma lit a lamp and showed the old man to the spare chamber. When she returned, Orland had begun reading the paper and he had nothing to say to her.

Just before he got up to go to bed, Orland called his wife.

'Give that man who said his name was Phelps a helping of beans and potatoes for breakfast,' he said, 'but don't give him but one plateful. Don't want to be the cause of prolonging the lives of people who walk through the snow and frost to New Hampshire in dead of winter.'

Orland went to bed then, leaving Emma to clean the room and to set the chairs against the wall. He was asleep long before she had finished her work.

When Orland got up and lit the lamp the next morning at five-thirty, he listened for several minutes before calling Emma. He went to the wall that separated their room from the spare chamber and listened for a sound of the old man. The only sound that he could hear anywhere in the house was the breathing of Emma.

After calling his wife, Orland went to the kitchen range and opened the draughts and shook down the ashes. The firebox was ablaze in a minute or two, and he went to the

next room and replenished the fire in the heater. Outside, it had stopped snowing during the night, and there were deep drifts of new snow.

Breakfast was ready at six-thirty, and Emma set the dishes aside on the range to wait until the old man came into the next room. She knew that Orland would call for his breakfast at almost any minute, but she delayed placing it on the table as long as she could.

'It's time for breakfast, Emma,' Orland said. 'Why haven't you got it ready?'

'Am putting it on the table right away,' she said. 'Maybe you had best go call Mr. Phelps while I'm doing it.'

'Will be damned if I go call him,' Orland said. 'Told the old fool last evening what time breakfast was ready, and if he doesn't get up when it's ready, then I'm not going to wear out my shoes running to call him. Sit down and let's eat, Emma.'

Emma sat down without a word.

After they had finished, Orland filled his pipe. He took a match from his coat pocket, but he waited a minute or longer before striking it.

'Clear away the dishes, Emma,' he said.

Orland's wife carried out the dishes and plates to the kitchen. She placed the dish of beans on the range to keep them warm a while longer.

When she came back into the room for the rest of the tableware, Orland motioned to her to listen to him. 'That old fool from the eastern country and going to New Hampshire to help his brother peel pulpwood had better be setting out toward the high mountains. He's already missed the breakfast we had for him. Will give him another ten minutes, and if he's not out of the house by then, I'll throw him out, leather breeches and all.'

Emma went back into the kitchen to wash the dishes while Orland filled the heater with maple chunks. One look at Orland's face was enough to frighten her out of the room.

Orland waited longer than ten minutes, and each second that passed made him more angry. It was almost eight o'clock then, an hour after breakfast was over. Orland got up and opened the house door and the storm door. His face was aflame and his motions were quick and jerky.

'Take care, woman,' he said to Emma. 'Take care!'

Emma came to the kitchen door and stood waiting to see what Orland was going to do. She did not know what on earth to do when Orland became as angry as he was then.

'Stand back, Emma,' he said. 'Stand back out of my way.'

He began running around the room, looking as if he himself did not know what he was likely to do that minute or the next.

'Orland——' Emma said, standing in the kitchen door where she could get out of his way if he should turn toward her.

'Take care, woman,' he shouted at her. 'Take care!'

Orland was piling all the furniture in the corner of the room beside the heater. He jerked up the carpet and the rugs, pulled down the curtains, and carried all the old newspapers and magazines to the fire. He was acting strangely, Emma knew, but she did not know what on earth he was going to do nor how to stop him. She had never seen Orland act like that before in all her life, and she had lived with him for almost fifty years.

'Orland——' she said again, glancing backward to the outside kitchen door to make certain of escape.

'Take care, woman,' Orland said. 'Take care!'

The furniture, rugs and carpet, and newspapers were blazing like a May grass fire within a few minutes. Smoke and flame rose to the ceiling and flowed down the walls. Just when Emma thought surely that Orland would be burned alive in the fire, he ran out of the door and into the yard. She ran screaming through the other door.

Emma's first thought when she saw the house burning was, where would they live now. Then she remembered their other house, the ten-room brick house down the road near the village. Orland would not live in it because he had said that the frame house would have to be worn out before they could go to live in their brick house. He had been saying that for twenty years, and during all of that time the fine brick house of ten rooms had been standing at waste. Now, at last, they could live in it.

There were no people passing along the road so early in the morning, but John White saw the smoke and flame from his house across the flats, and he came running over with a bucket of water. By the time he got there, all the water had splashed out of the bucket, and he set it down and looked at the fire.

'Am sorry to see that, Orland,' he said.

'Save your pity for some who are in need of it,' Orland said.

'Well, you've got good insurance on it, anyway,' John said. 'That will help a lot. When you collect the insurance money, you can go and live in your brick house in style and good comfort.'

'Not going to collect the insurance,' Orland said.

'You're not! Why won't you collect it?'

'Because I set fire to the house myself.'

'Set fire to it yourself! Good God, Orland, you must have lost your mind and reason!'

'Had a blamed good reason for doing it.'

John White walked away and turned around and came back where Orland was standing. He looked at Orland and then at the burning house and at Orland again.

Orland began telling John about the old man who had said his name was Phelps. He started at the beginning when Phelps knocked on the storm door at mealtime. Then he told John about giving the old man permission to spend the night in the house after he had walked in unbidden.

'But I told him to get up in time for breakfast at six-thirty,' Orland said. 'I told him that, and the old fool heard me, too. When this morning came, I waited five, ten minutes for him to come and eat. He didn't even get up out of bed. He just stayed there, sleeping. Then I sat and waited a whole hour for him to get up, but he still just stayed in the spare chamber and slept. Am not the kind to allow the country to get cluttered up with men with no more sense than to start out walking to New Hampshire in dead of winter to peel pulpwood. That old fool said he started out from somewhere in the eastern country to walk over there through the snow and frost, and he hadn't even got as far as the high mountains. If I hadn't stopped him here, he'd have gone to some town and couldn't go further. Then he'd have been a burden on the state, because there's not a town down-Maine that would have claimed him, not even a town in the eastern country would have given him citizenship.'

Suddenly, Emma screamed and fell down on her back. Orland ran to see what was the matter with her.

While he was away attending to Emma, John White saw something move behind one of the windows in the spare chamber. Before he could go closer to see what it was, the roof over that part of the building fell in, sending up a shower of sparks and fragments of black embers.

Orland came back beside John and stood watching the ouse as it sank lower and lower to the ground.

'Lived in this town a long time,' John said, 'almost any an's lifetime, I guess, but I never before saw a man burn s house down just for durn meanness. Don't guess you'd ave done it, if it wasn't for the fact that you own a brick use that's a lot better shelter than this frame one was.'

'That old fool said he was on his way to New Hampshire o help his brother peel——'

'Well, all I've got to say is that it looks to me like you could have asked him just once to get up out of bed and clear out of the house. Doesn't appear to me like a man ought to set fire to and burn down a good frame house just because a guest won't get out of bed in time for breakfast.'

'Maybe I wouldn't have done it,' Orland said, 'but er I had thought all night about it, there wasn't any ner way to treat him. Why, that old fool who said his ame was Phelps opened my door and come in without my bidding, right when I was sitting at the table at mealtime. You don't guess I'd have gone and asked him to get out of bed, do you, after he had done a thing like that?'

'Guess you would have gone and told him to get up, all right, if you hadn't been trying for nearly twenty years to find a way to move into your brick house. This frame house was just about worn out, anyway, Orland. Wasn't no sense in burning him up just to get the house down and out of your way.'

'Couldn't take the risk,' Orland said. 'This house has always been cussed mean. It was just hardheaded enough to have stood in good repair right up to the day I took ill nd died.'

THE END OF CHRISTY TUCKER

CHRISTY TUCKER rode into the plantation town on muleback late in the afternoon, whistling all the way. He had been hewing new pickets for the fence round his house all morning, and he was feeling good for having got so much done. He did not have a chance to go to the plantation town very often, and when he could go he did not lose any time in getting there.

He tied up the mule at the racks behind the row of stores, and the first thing he noticed was the way the other negroes out there did not seem anxious to speak to him. Christy had been on friendly terms with all the coloured people on the plantation ever since he and his wife had moved there three months before, and he could not understand why they pretended not to see him.

He walked slowly down the road toward the plantation office wondering why nobody spoke to him.

After he had gone a little farther, he met Froggy Miller. He caught Froggy by the arm before Froggy could dodge him.

'What's the matter with you folks today?' he said. Froggy Miller lived only a mile from his house in a straight line across the cotton field, and he knew Froggy better

than anyone else on the plantation. 'What's the matter, anyway, Froggy?'

Froggy, a big six-foot negro with close-cropped hair, moved away.

He grabbed Froggy by the arm and shook him.

'Now, look here!' Christy said, getting worried. 'Why do you and everybody else act so strange?'

'Mr. Lee Crossman sent for you, didn't he?' Froggy said.

'Sure, he sent for me,' Christy said. 'I reckon he wants to talk to me about the farming. But what's that got to do with——'

Before he could finish, Froggy had pulled away from him and walked hurriedly up the road.

Without wasting any more time, Christy ran toward the plantation office to find out what the trouble was.

The plantation bookkeeper, Hendricks, and Lee Crossman's younger brother, Morgan, were sitting in the front office with their feet on the window-sill when he ran inside. Hendricks got up when he saw Christy and went through the door into the back room. While the bookkeeper was in the other room, Morgan Crossman stared sullenly at the negro.

'Come here, you,' Hendricks said, coming through the door.

Christy turned around and saw Lee Crossman, the owner and boss of the plantation, standing in the doorway.

'Yes, sir,' Christy said.

Lee Crossman was dressed in heavy grey riding-breeches and tan shirt, and he wore black boots that laced to his knees. He stood aside while Christy walked into the back room and closed the door on the outside. Christy walked to the middle of the room and stood there waiting for Lee Crossman.

Christy had moved to the Crossman plantation the first

of the year, about three months before. It was the first time he had ever been in Georgia, and he had grown to like it better than Alabama, where he had always lived. He and his wife had decided to come to Georgia because they had heard that the land there was better for sharecropping cotton. Christy said he could not be satisfied merely making a living; he wanted to get ahead in life.

Lee Crossman still had not come, and Christy sat down in one of the chairs. He had no more than seated himself when the door opened. He jumped to his feet.

'Howdy, Mr. Lee,' he said, smiling. 'I've had a good chance to look at the land, and I'd like to be furnished with another mule and a gang plough. I figure I can raise twice as much cotton on that kind of land with a gang plough, because it's about the best I ever saw. There's not a rock or stump on it, and it's as clear of bushes as the palm of my hand. I haven't even found a gully anywhere on it. If you'll furnish me with another mule and a gang plough, I'll raise more cotton for you than any two sharecroppers on your plantation.'

Lee Crossman listened until he had finished, and then he slammed the door shut and strode across the room.

'I sent for you, nigger,' he said. 'You didn't send for me, did you?'

'That's right, Mr. Lee,' he said. 'You sent for me.'

'Then keep your black face shut until I tell you to open it.'

'Yes, sir, Mr. Lee,' Christy said, backing across the room until he found himself against the wall. Lee Crossman sat down in a chair and glared at him. 'Yes, sir, Mr. Lee,' Christy said again.

'You're one of these biggity niggers, ain't you?' Lee said. 'Where'd you come from, anyway? You ain't a Georgia nigger, are you?'

'No, sir, Mr. Lee,' Christy said, shaking his head. 'I was born and raised in Alabama.'

'Didn't they teach you any better than this in Alabama?'

'Yes, sir, Mr. Lee.'

'Then why did you come over here to Georgia and start acting so biggity?'

'I don't know, Mr. Lee.'

Christy wiped his face with the palm of his hand and wondered what Lee Crossman was angry with him about. He began to understand why the other negroes had gone out of their way to keep from talking to him. They knew he had been sent for, and that meant he had done something to displease Lee Crossman. They did not wish to be seen talking to anyone who was in disfavour with the plantation owner and boss.

'Have you got a radio?' Lee asked.

'Yes, sir.'

'Where'd you get it?'

'I bought it on time.'

'Where'd you get the money to pay on it?'

'I had a little, and my wife raises a few chickens.'

'Why didn't you buy it at the plantation store?'

'I made a better bargain at the other place. I got it a little cheaper.'

'Niggers who live on my plantation buy what they need at my plantation store,' Lee said.

'I didn't want to go into debt to you, Mr. Lee,' Christy said. 'I wanted to come out ahead when the accounts are settled at the end of the year.'

Lee Crossman leaned back in the chair, crossed his legs, and took out his pocket-knife. He began cleaning his finger-nails.

There was silence in the room for several minutes. Christy leaned against the wall.

'Stand up straight, nigger!' Lee shouted at him.

'Yes, sir,' Christy said, jumping erect.

'Did you split up some of my wood to hew pickets for the fence around the house where you live?'

'Yes, sir, Mr. Lee.'

'Why didn't you ask me if I wanted you to do it?'

'I figured the fence needed some new pickets to take the place of some that had rotted, and because I'm living in the house I went ahead and did it.'

'You act mighty big, don't you?' Lee said. 'You act like you own my house and land, don't you? You act like you think you're as good as a white man, don't you?'

'No, sir, Mr. Lee,' Christy protested. 'I don't try to act any of those ways. I just naturally like to hustle and get things done, that's all. I just can't be satisfied unless I'm fixing a fence or cutting wood or picking cotton, or something. I just naturally like to get things done.'

'Do you know what we do with biggity niggers like you in Georgia?'

'No, sir.'

'We teach them to mind their own business and stay in their place.'

Lee Crossman got up and crossed the room to the closet. He jerked the door open and reached inside. When he turned around, he was holding a long leather strap studded with heavy brass brads. He came back across the room, slapping the strap around his boot tops.

'Who told your wife she could raise chickens on my plantation?' he said to Christy.

'Nobody told her, Mr. Lee,' Christy said. 'We didn't think you'd mind. There's plenty of yard around the house for them, and I built a little henhouse.'

'Stop arguing with me, nigger!'

'Yes, sir.'

'I don't want chickens scratching up crops on this plantation.'

'Yes, sir,' Christy said.

'Where did you get money to pay on a radio?'

'I snared a few rabbits and skinned them, and then I sold their hides for a little money.'

'I don't want no rabbits touched on my plantation,' Lee said.

He shook out the heavy strap and cracked it against his boots.

'Why haven't you got anything down on the books in the plantation store?' Lee asked.

'I just don't like to go into debt,' Christy said. 'I want to come out ahead when the accounts are settled at the end of the year.'

'That's my business whether you come out owing or owed at the end of the year,' Lee said.

He pointed to a crack in the floor.

'Take off that shirt and drop your pants and get down on your knees straddle that crack,' the white man said.

'What are you going to do to me, Mr. Lee?'

'I'll show you what I'm going to do,' he replied. 'Take off that shirt and pants and get down there like I told you.'

'Mr. Lee, I can't let you beat me like that. No, sir, Mr. Lee. I can't let you do that to me. I just can't!'

'You black-skinned, back-talking coon, you!' Lee shouted, his face turning crimson with anger.

He struck Christy with the heavy, brass-studded strap. Christy backed out of reach, and when Lee struck him the second time, the Negro caught the strap and held on to it. Lee glared at him at first, and then he tried to jerk it out of his grip.

'Mr. Lee, I haven't done anything except catch a few

rabbits and raise a few chickens and things like that,' Christy protested. 'I didn't mean any harm at all. I thought you'd be pleased if I put some new pickets in your fence.'

'Shut your mouth and get that shirt and pants off like I told you,' he said, angrier than ever. 'And turn that strap loose before I blast it loose from you.'

Christy stayed where he was and held on to the strap with all his might. Lee was so angry he could not speak after that. He ran to the closet and got his pistol. He swung round and fired it at Christy three times. Christy released his grip on the strap and sank to the floor.

Lee's brother, Morgan, and the bookkeeper, Hendricks, came running into the back room.

'What happened, Lee?' his brother asked, seeing Christy Tucker lying on the floor.

'That nigger threatened me,' Lee said, blowing hard. He walked to the closet and tossed the pistol on the shelf. 'You and Hendricks heard him threaten to kill me. I had to shoot him down to protect my own life.'

They left the back room and went into the front office. Several clerks from the plantation store ran in and wanted to know what all the shooting was about.

'Just a biggity nigger,' Lee said, washing his hands at the sink. 'He was that Alabama nigger that came over here two or three months ago. I sent for him this morning to ask him what he meant by putting new pickets in the fence round his house without asking me first. When I got him in here, he threatened me. He was a bad nigger.'

The clerks went back to the plantation store, and Hendricks opened up his books and went to work on the accounts.

'Open up the back door,' Lee told his brother, 'and let those niggers out in the back see what happens when one

of them gets as biggity as that coon from Alabama got.'

His brother opened the back door. When he looked outside into the road, there was not a negro in sight. The only living thing out there was the mule on which Christy Tucker had ridden to town.

THUNDERSTORM

SUNDAY afternoon came, and it was hotter than ever. If the heat kept up much longer, there would not be a blade of grass or stalk of corn alive in the whole country.

Will Tannet went to the front porch and looked at the thermometer. It was 105 degrees in the shade.

'People can't stand this much longer,' he said.

He walked to the edge of the porch and looked at the sky. There was not a cloud to be seen anywhere.

His wife, Annie, came to the door behind him.

'Any sign of rain yet, Will?' she asked hopefully.

He shook his head.

When he turned around, she had gone.

'It's going to drive people crazy—or something,' he said, looking up at the pale, faded blue sky. He unbuttoned his shirt another button, wiped his face, neck, and arms, and went to the barn to give the stock as much water as he could spare.

The girls, Nancy and Florabelle, were in their room changing their clothes. No matter how hot it got, they always had company on Sunday afternoons. Evans Waller had been there every Sunday afternoon for the past five

or six months, to see Nancy, and two or three others generally came to call on Florabelle. Nancy and Evans were engaged, but they were keeping it a secret from Nancy's father until the drought was broken. They knew better than to say anything to Will until it rained.

Florabelle finished dressing and came out on the front porch first. She had on the white organdie dress that made her look cool even on the hottest day.

Her father came round the corner of the house, stopping when he saw her. He glared at her for a while before saying anything.

'What you up to now?' he said finally.

'Nothing, Pa,' Florabelle said. 'Nothing at all. Why?'

'I'd better not ever catch you at anything,' he said. 'I won't stand having no daughter of mine running wild. If I ever hear anything about you or Nancy, I'll thrash the hide off you both, even if you are nearly grown up.'

'Why, Pa!' Florabelle said protestingly. 'What on earth are you talking about? Now, you stop saying things like that about Nancy and me.'

'Then remember what I told you,' he said.

Will went into the house for his tobacco and came out again. He stopped at the corner of the house. 'Tell your mother I'm going across the field to look at the spring,' he said. He started off, but stopped after a few steps. 'And don't you and your sister forget what I told you, either.'

He went off out of sight round the house, going in the direction of the spring, a mile and a half away. The last time he was there, the spring looked as if it might run dry any day. It had never dried up before during the forty-six years he had lived on the farm; but it had never been so hot before since he could remember, and the land had never been without rain that long, either. It had not

rained in that part of the country for seven weeks, and it was beginning to look as if it would never rain again. The earth was parched and cracked, the creek had dried up until there was only a dusty bed left to show for it, and the corn had curled up and dried a long time ago.

Half an hour after Will Tannet had left to look at the spring, Evans Waller drove up to the house in his car. Florabelle could see the dust being blown up in the road half a mile away before he got there, and she ran into the house. She was with Nancy in their room when Evans got out and came up on the porch.

'Hello, Nancy!' he called through the open door of the house. Then he sat down to wait. 'Is Florabelle at home?'

Nobody answered him.

Mrs. Tannet came through the hall from the kitchen when she heard Evans's voice. She went into the room with her daughters.

'Now, Nancy,' she began, 'don't you and Evans drive off and leave Florabelle here by herself again. Every Sunday for the past two months you and Evans have gone for a ride and left her behind. She was here by herself last Sunday for almost two hours before any young man came to see her. I don't want you treating your sister like that again. You and Evans stay right here until Florabelle has company. Do you hear, Nancy?'

Nancy did not say anything. She went to the porch to see Evans.

'How about a ride?' he asked the first thing. 'It's too hot to sit here.'

'We'll have to wait until somebody comes to see Florabelle,' Nancy said, sitting down on the bench beside him. 'Is anybody coming that you know of? Is Harry coming today? or Jimmy?'

Evans kicked the chair in front of him.

'Listen,' he said, 'why can't she look after her own self? Why do I have to——'

'Don't talk like that, Evans,' Nancy pleaded. 'You know how Mama is about Florabelle. It will only be——'

'I'm pretty tired of it, anyway,' he said. 'Every time I come here, I'm expected to sit around and wait for Florabelle to get a date. She can take care of herself, can't she? What's wrong with everybody here, anyhow?'

He got up and looked at the thermometer.

'God Almighty, it's a hundred and five here,' he said, turning around and glaring at Nancy as though it was her fault it was so hot. 'I'm going where it's cooler. Florabelle and you both can go to hell for all I care. I'm not going to sit here in this furnace and sweat myself to death. I have to sweat my hide off in the fields all week long, but I don't have to sit here and do it on Sunday, too. I'm leaving.'

Evans got to the steps before Nancy caught him by the arm. He was about to jerk free of her when Florabelle came to the door.

'Hello, Evans,' she said. 'You look cooler than anybody I've seen all week.'

'Hello,' he said. He stood and glared at both of them for a long time. His gaze settled upon her bosom. 'Hello,' he said again.

He went back to the bench and sat down.

'Seen Jimmy Barker lately, Evans?' Florabelle said.

'No.'

'Frank Littlefield?'

'No.'

'Harry?'

'No.'

Nancy jumped up and ran to the end of the porch.

'I'll bet that's Harry!' she said.

Florabelle smoothed out her dress and looked up the

road. Evans got up and went down the steps to the yard.

'Come on, Nancy,' he said. 'Let's go. This is the hottest place in the world. Let's go somewhere and cool off.'

He and Nancy got into his car and drove off, leaving Florabelle watching the cloud of dust being blown up by the car coming in the opposite direction.

She saw it was not Jimmy as soon as the car turned into the yard. It was Frank Littlefield. She had hoped it was Jimmy.

'Hot, ain't it?' he said, coming up on the porch and dropping into a chair.

'It must be the same everywhere,' she said. 'Or is it cooler on the other side of the ridge?'

'It's cooler than this place. Anywhere is cooler than it is here. Why does your old man live in a hotbox like this, anyway?'

'Because it's our farm. We wouldn't have any place to live if we left here.'

Frank got up and looked at the thermometer. It was still a hundred and five, but it was moving slowly toward a hundred and six. 'If it gets any hotter, people are going to start acting like mad dogs,' he said.

Florabelle fanned herself, keeping an eye on the road.

'How about going swimming down at Coulter's Mill?' Frank said. 'That's what I'd like to do. How about it?'

Florabelle looked quickly in both directions to see if there were any signs of Jimmy Barker's coming. She began to wonder what she could do in order to make Frank wait a while longer. If Jimmy came or Harry Cole, she wanted to get out of going with Frank.

'How about going swimming, I said!' he shouted. 'Can't you hear anything—are you deaf?'

'It's early yet, isn't it?' she said.

'What's the matter with you, anyway?' he shouted. 'Trying to stall me? I've got to go somewhere and cool off. I'll start foaming at the mouth if I have to sit here in this heat.'

'Don't talk that way, Frank. You know I don't mean anything like that at all.'

'If anybody asked me, I'd say you were the worst two-timer that ever lived. I didn't think I'd ever let myself get two-timed by a wench like you.'

Florabelle's face flushed, but she tried to hide it from him. She turned away, watching the road at the same time.

'Well,' Frank said, standing up in front of her, 'if you won't go with me, you can go to hell.'

He started down the steps. She ran and caught him by the arm in desperation.

'You wouldn't talk to me like that, Frank, if it wasn't for the heat. I know you don't mean what you say. As soon as it rains and turns cooler, you won't say things like that.'

'It's never going to rain again,' he said, pulling away from her and going toward his car.

Florabelle was about to run after him when she saw an automobile coming down the road. She was sure it was either Harry or Jimmy Barker.

Frank started the engine and turned his car round. He almost ran head on into the other car. Jimmy drove into the yard.

'What was Frank Littlefield so mad about?' Jimmy asked her.

'Oh, I don't know,' Florabelle said. 'He just couldn't stand the heat, I suppose.'

They went up on the porch and sat on the bench.

'How about taking a little walk?' he asked her. 'Just me and you off somewhere in the woods. It would be cooler in the woods.'

Florabelle laughed.

'Pa wouldn't let me do anything like that,' she said, looking shyly up at Jimmy.

'Go ask your mama, then,' he said.

Florabelle's face flushed a little.

'Pa will be coming back soon,' she said, 'and if he didn't find me here, he'd go looking for me.'

Jimmy stared at the thermometer hanging on the wall.

'It's too hot to stay here. Let's go somewhere.'

Florabelle got up and went to him at the steps.

'If we didn't stay too long, it might be all right,' she said slowly.

'Come on,' he said, pulling her down into the yard.

They were half-way across the yard when another automobile came racing up the road. It suddenly slowed down and turned into the yard. Frank Littlefield jumped out.

'Putting me off, weren't you, just like I said?'

Before Florabelle could answer, Frank had hit Jimmy on the chin. Jimmy fell over backward, but was up on his feet again in a flash.

'Come on out behind the barn where I can do a good job,' Frank said. He strode off in that direction, walking sideways and keeping his eyes on Jimmy. 'Come on, if you ain't yellow.'

Jimmy went after him, trying to catch up. They sparred at each other until they were out of sight behind the barn.

Florabelle did not know what to do. She stood where she was for a while, then she went to the porch and listened to the sounds that came across the yard.

First she could hear Frank's voice, then Jimmy's. Next she heard them shouting at the same time, and finally she could not distinguish between them any more. After a while there were no sounds that she could hear.

They had been behind the barn for such a long time

that she began to wonder why they did not come back. It seemed to her as if they had been gone at least half an hour. She hoped they would make up and come back to the house before her father came home. She did not know what might happen if he came back and found them fighting out there like that.

Florabelle waited as long as she could. By that time she knew at least an hour had passed since Jimmy and Frank had disappeared from sight.

Just as she was getting ready to go and see what had happened to them, her father came up the path. She sank down into a chair when she saw him.

'That spring won't last much longer,' he said. 'It'll probably be gone by this time tomorrow. I don't know what I'm going to do about water when the spring goes dry.'

He looked at the car nearest him in the yard.

'Whose is that?' he asked her.

'It's Jimmy Barker's,' she said, trembling with fright.

'Where's he at?' he asked her.

'He and Frank Littlefield went out behind the barn,' she said. She was unable to sit still any longer. 'They've been out there an awfully long time, Pa.'

'What did they go out there for?'

'They had an argument.'

Without a word Will Tannet walked toward the barn. He picked up a good-sized stick along the way.

Presently he came around the corner of the barn and motioned to her. She went slowly toward her father. He did not take his eyes from her.

'What's the matter, Pa?' she asked when she got closer.

'Come here and look, and then maybe you can tell me what's the matter.'

Florabelle peered cautiously around the corner of the

barn. Both Jimmy and Frank were stretched out on the ground, lying motionless in the blazing sun. Before she shut her eyes and turned away, she saw the two pitchforks lying between them. She knew without another thought what had happened. She did not remember anything else after that.

When she opened her eyes, there was a thunder in her ears. It sounded as though the whole world was being broken apart. The sky outside was dark, but during the flashes of lightning she could see the outline of the room about her.

'What happened?' she asked.

Her mother was holding her hand, but she was crying so, she could not answer.

When Florabelle closed her eyes, she could hear her father's voice somewhere in the room. She tried to open her eyes again, but they would not open.

'It hasn't rained a drop yet,' she heard him say. 'With all this thunder and lightning. God would be serving us right if He never let it rain a single drop again.'

She thought she heard other sounds, but she could not understand anything she heard after that. The thunder and lightning was louder than the screams of her mother and the curses of her father.

SQUIRE DINWIDDY

My wife and I moved to the country toward the end of June, hopefully looking forward to a long restful summer in the Connecticut hills. But we soon discovered that we had been overly optimistic. It seemed that we were too far back in the hills to interest maids, housemen, or even tree surgeons. Nobody from the agencies wanted to work that distance from Stamford or Bridgeport.

We had been doing our own housework for a week when we looked up one morning while cooking breakfast to see a big shiny black limousine drive up and stop. A negro man about thirty years old and wearing what appeared to be the remnants of a ragbag after it had been picked over came around to the kitchen door and knocked lightly.

'Good morning, boss,' he said, peering through the door. 'How you folks making out?'

My wife was all for sending him away without more ado, but by that time he had opened the screen door and had stepped into the kitchen.

'Good morning,' I replied civilly. 'Lost?'

'No, sir, boss,' he said, his lips rolling back from two neat rows of the whitest teeth I had ever seen. 'I'm right here. I ain't lost one bit.'

'What do you want?' my wife asked him.

'I'se come to take hold,' he said.

'Take hold of what?' I asked, concerned.

'Take hold the work, boss,' he answered, grinning.

'Who sent you?' my wife and I asked simultaneously.

'Nobody sent me,' he said. 'I just heard about it and come.'

My wife and I looked at each other, each wondering if the other were going to be able to think of something to say. Our attention was drawn back to the negro when he opened the screen door and shooed a stray fly out of the kitchen.

'What can you do?' my wife asked at last.

'Anything you or the boss wants done, Missy,' he said respectfully. 'Eating, drinking, clotheses, driving, laundering—anything at all. Now, you folks just go sit down in comfort at the table and make yourself feel at ease, and I'll have your breakfast in front of you in no time at all. I'll fix up my special extra omelette and see how you folks take to it.'

We moved toward the dining-room.

'How much do you want in wages?' I asked.

'Would it hurt you to pay fifteen a week, boss?'

'Well,' I said hesitatingly, 'maybe we can stand it.'

'I'll take thirteen and a half,' he said almost obligingly, 'if that'll help you out any.'

We backed through the door.

'What's your name?' my wife asked.

'Squire,' he said, grinning until his white teeth gleamed from ear to ear. 'Squire Dinwiddy.'

When my wife and I reached the hall, we stopped and looked at each other questioningly for a moment. All we could do was to nod our heads.

'Squire,' I called through the door, 'now that you've

got a new job, don't you think you ought to return that limousine to your former employer——'

'Boss,' he spoke up proudly, 'that there's my machine, I'se the lawful solitary owner.'

We backed carefully into the dining-room, watching our step.

All went well until one morning about a week later. It happened to be the Fourth of July. My wife and I had been out late the evening before, and at seven o'clock we were sound asleep. But not for long. There was a terrific explosion on the lawn just outside our window. I rushed from bed, threw open the screen, and looked out. There squatted Squire Dinwiddy, holding a lighted match under the fuse of the biggest firecracker I had ever seen. The fuse began to spew, and Squire dashed away and got behind a tree. The salute went off, charring the grass and blowing a hole in the earth. My wife screamed.

'Squire!' I yelled. 'What are you doing!'

Squire stuck his head cautiously around the trunk of the tree and looked up at me in the window.

'It's the Fourth of July, boss,' he said, grinning happily. 'Did you forget all about that?'

'No, I didn't forget,' I said. 'And it's not up to you to remind me at this time of morning, either.'

'I still got one more to shoot off, boss,' Squire said, striking a match and setting the fuse on another giant cracker to spewing.

'Hold your ears!' I shouted to my wife just in time.

The cracker went off while Squire was still running from it. When the report sounded, it caught him by surprise and he jumped two feet off the ground. Then he stopped and looked around.

'It makes celebrating best when they go off when you

ain't expecting them to, don't it, boss?' he said, grinning up at the window.

'Maybe,' I said.

Three weeks later, just when we had accustomed ourselves to Squire's manner of running the house, he came in one morning and said he was sorry to have to do it, but that he had to go away for several days on a business trip.

We were upset by his sudden announcement, and my wife protested vigorously.

'Can't you postpone your trip for a while, Squire?' she said. 'We can't get anybody to take your place on such short notice.'

'I'm sorry about the notice I didn't give,' Squire said apologetically, 'but the time crept up on me while I wasn't paying attention.'

'At least,' my wife said, 'you can wait a day or two. Maybe by then we——'

'No, ma'am!' he said emphatically, 'I just naturally can't wait. I'se got to be in Washington by six o'clock this very day.'

'Six o'clock!' I said. 'How do you expect to get to Washington by six o'clock!'

'On the plane, boss,' he said. 'I'se flying down on the two o'clock plane from New York.'

My wife and I looked at each other helplessly.

'That costs a lot of money, Squire,' she said, hoping to discourage him. 'Do you realize what it costs?'

'Yes, ma'am,' Squire said, 'but I add it to my expenses.'

'What expenses?' I asked. 'What expenses are you talking about?'

'The expenses of doing business,' Squire said.

My wife and I stared at each other bewilderedly.

'What kind of business?' I asked, wondering.

'I kind of forgot to mention it to you, I reckon,' Squire

said sheepishly. 'I has to go to Washington once every month to collect the rents.'

'What rents?' I asked. 'Whose rents?'

'My rents,' he answered. 'I'se got twenty-seven families living in my tenements down there, and I can't afford to let the rents fall behind. The rents just can't be collected, not in Washington, noway, if you let them ran over. Because the renters will let you get an eviction against them, and after that they have the law on their side. They don't have to pay the past-due rent at all after that. So that's why I never let the renters get that far along. I stay just one jump ahead of what they're thinking in their heads down there while I'm up here.'

My wife and I could only stare at Squire for a long time after he had finished. He began to grin then, his lips rolling back from his straight white teeth.

'Why, that makes you an absentee landlord, Squire,' I said finally, shaking my head.

'It sure does, boss,' he said, his whole face agrin. 'That's why I'm taking the plane this afternoon. I don't aim to be absent when the rents come due. No, sir, boss!'

Squire bowed, backing toward his shiny black limousine with the silver speaking tube. He grinned broadly as he got in and started the motor. As he rolled away, he stuck an arm out and waved to us.

'Good-bye, boss!' he called. 'I'll be right back again as soon as I collect the rents!'

We raised our arms and waved until he was out of sight. After that we turned and stared at each other, wondering what there was to say.

THE WINDFALL

WHEN Waldo Murdock, whose trade, when he felt like working at it, was rendering creatures, came into the unexpected inheritance, there had been no commotion in Brighton to equal it since the time when, eleven years before, one of the Perkins brothers, with no more forewarning than a stroke of summer lightning, ran away in broad daylight with the resident minister's wife.

As for the townspeople, none of them, not even Aunt Susie Shook, who told fortunes by reading tea-leaves, or coffee-grounds if necessary, had ever had the remotest idea that anything in the nature of sudden wealth would fall into Waldo Murdock's scrawny lap, while at the same time, of course, people were quick to say that if he had not been sitting down, as usual, instead of being up and doing, there would have been no lap of his for it to fall into; and certainly Waldo himself, even though he daydreamed about almost everything else under the sun, had never entertained such a far-fetched thought in his mind.

Waldo did not even know he had a brother in Australia and, even if he had known it, he would never have imagined that he would be remembered in a will. From Bangor

to Burlington, all the Murdocks, especially the home-owning branch of the family, were known throughout the entire region north of Boston for their trait, which relatives by marriage and other outsiders called cussedness, of not acknowledging kinship with one another. And as it was, it was all Waldo could do to force himself, after having cast aside pride of long standing, publicly to admit blood relationship with another Murdock, even if he had lived in Australia, long enough to go to the bank in Waterville and cash the cheque the lawyer from Portland had handed him.

'Pay no mind to what the people say,' he told the clerk in the bank. 'There may be others in the State of Maine bearing the name of Murdock, but there's not a single drop of mingling blood that I would own to. I'd sooner claim kinship with my old black cow than I would with a so-called Murdock.'

Dessie, Waldo's wife, was at the beginning the most level-headed of all. She maintained her mental balance, if only at the start, much better than Waldo and some of the townspeople. Dessie, although afterward she regretted not having gone along, even remained at home and tended the house chores while Waldo was away in Waterville cashing the cheque. There was only one thing she did out of the ordinary that forenoon, and that was to make Justine, the hired girl, air the parlour and shake out the scatter rugs, even if it was not Saturday.

During all that time the neighbours were ringing her up on the phone and asking what she was going to do with all that money, but that, too, in the beginning, failed to veer the even measure of her thoughts.

'When the cheque is cashed, if it's not worthless, and it'll be a wonder if it's not, there'll be ample time at hand for me to go out of my way to think about it,' she told

them. 'Right now, and likely forever after, it's nothing but a scrawl and a promise on a slip of paper.'

Dessie went back to work with her lips a little tighter each time she finished talking to one of the neighbours on the phone. She was not exactly worried, she told Justine, but she was feeling impatient. Waldo failed to come home at the noon hour for dinner, and it was not long after that before she, like everybody else in Brighton who was working himself into a frenzy over Waldo's sudden windfall, began thinking of the things that could be done with the money.

Late that afternoon Waldo drove up to the dooryard and left the automobile standing there instead of putting it away in the shed where it belonged.

Justine came running to tell her.

Dessie was so on edge by that time that she jumped several inches off the chair seat when Justine, who was as excited as she by then, ran into the room where she was.

'Mr. Murdock's back!' Justine cried, twisting her fingers.

'He'd better be!' Dessie said. 'If he hadn't got home when he did, he could have just kept on travelling, for all the concern I'd ever have.'

'I guess Mr. Murdock has the real money,' Justine said, looking over her shoulder. 'He looked like he was feeling good about it when he got out of the auto.'

Dessie leaped to her feet.

'Go on about your tasks, whatever they be, Justine,' she said crossly. 'It's none of your money, if there is any, anyway.'

Justine went to the kitchen and watched Waldo come along the path to the side door.

Waldo came in, throwing his hat on the table. He looked

at Dessie for a moment, cocking his head a little to one side. His coat pocket sagged heavily.

Neither Dessie nor Waldo spoke for a while.

Presently Dessie walked up to him and held out her hand.

'Guess I'll take charge for the time being, Waldo,' she said stiffly. 'Hand it over.'

Waldo reached into his coat pocket, drawing out a mostly empty bottle and handing it to her. She stepped back, looking at it severely. Then, without a word, she grabbed the bottle by the neck and slung it with all her might across the room. It struck the wall, shattering into dozens of pieces.

'I might have known it, and I would have, if I had only had the sense God has given most people!' she said, raising her voice. 'I've got only myself to blame!'

Waldo reached for a chair.

'Now there's no cause for a human to take on so, Dessie,' he said. 'Everything turned out, from here to there and back again, like it was made to order.'

He reached into his pants pocket and drew out a bulging roll of greenbacks. The bills were tied tightly around the centre with a piece of heavy twine. Dessie forgot her anger the instant she saw the money. The scowling lines on her face disappeared completely while she watched Waldo bounce the roll up and down in his hand.

'All I've got to say,' she began, 'is that I never thought I'd live to breathe the air of the day when a deceasing Murdock would have the decency to do the honourable thing with his money, even if he couldn't find means of taking it along with him when he went, which would be a wonder if he didn't try to do, and he probably did, anyway.'

Waldo leaned back and let her talk to her heart's con-

tent. He felt so good himself that he wanted her to have a good time, too. He let her speak what came to mind, without uttering a single grumble.

'Have you any more blood relations that we've neglected to remind ourselves of, Waldo?' she asked, leaning toward him. 'It seems to me that I recall your second cousin in Skowhegan saying once some years ago that a Murdock went to California at the end of the Spanish-American War and prospected for gold. It might be that he struck it rich out there, which a lot of people did, so I've read, if reading can be believed. If we'd been more particular about your blood relations in the past, we wouldn't have to sit here now and rack our brains trying to call them to mind at a time like this.'

'Guess I have no blood relations of the name of Murdock,' Waldo said firmly.

Dessie drew a deep breath and looked longingly at the large roll of greenbacks bouncing up and down in her husband's hand.

Suddenly she leaned forward and grasped the roll desperately.

Waldo snatched it from her.

'I think we ought to start making plans,' she said.

'This is Murdock money, woman,' he said quickly. 'A Murdock made it and a Murdock shall spend it.'

Dessie sat up decisively.

'Well, anyway, we'll be sensible,' she said calmly. 'We won't throw it away on trifles like a lot of people would who I could mention, if I had a mind to.'

'I've got it all settled, Dessie,' Waldo told her, smiling as a kindly feeling came over him. 'Guess we can afford to have a good time now at our age. Maybe we won't be lingering here much longer, which would be a shame if we hadn't taken full advantage of it by the time we went.

Wouldn't be no sense in hoarding it only to have to pass it along to somebody else after we are gone.'

Dessie nodded approvingly, her spirits rising again.

'I've always wanted a fur neckpiece, Waldo,' she said, her face bright with hope.

Dessie did not sleep a single wink that night For an hour after they had gone to bed, she lay silently tense, listening. Waldo did not stir. He lay on his back listening to Dessie's laboured breathing.

Just before midnight Dessie got up as quietly as she possibly could and tiptoed to the foot of the bed where Waldo had laid his pants over the back of a chair. It was dark in the room with the shades drawn, and she took care in feeling her way to the chair. She was trembling nervously when she touched it, and the jerking of her breath had started a pain in her chest. Without losing any more time she slid her hand into the pants pocket.

'Get your hand out of my pants, Dessie,' Waldo said, rising up in bed. 'Leave that money be.'

Dessie dropped the pants without having touched the money, and went back to bed without a word. Neither of them spoke as she lay down again and tried to make herself as comfortable as possible for the remainder of the night. After that both of them lay staring into the blackness of the room.

Just as dawn was beginning to show the first signs of breaking, Dessie slid carefully from the bed and crawled on her hands and knees toward the chair. As she was rising up to reach the pants. Waldo sat up erectly.

'Don't want to have to mention it again about you putting your hand in my pants pocket,' he said. 'Leave that money be, Dessie.'

Dessie dropped the pants and went to the window. She stood there watching a red dawn break in the east. After

a while she began dressing, and as she was leaving the chamber she heard Justine starting a fire in the kitchen stove.

While she and Justine were preparing breakfast, she began to realize how uneasy she really was about the money. She had spent a sleepless night worrying over the wealth, and she was afraid she would not get a chance to spend a single penny of it herself.

'Mrs. Murdock,' Justine said, coming and standing beside her, 'Carl and I could get mated right away if we had the money for a chamber suite.'

'Let Carl Friend make his own money,' Dessie said sharply, turning on the girl. 'Me and my husband have worked hard all our lives for what we possess. It won't hurt Carl Friend to do the same for you, if he wants a family.'

'I couldn't sleep much last night for staying awake wondering if you and Mr. Murdock wouldn't want to help me out,' Justine said persistently. 'Especially because I've worked here for you six years without asking favours, and I didn't think you'd miss a little of all that big inheritance from Australia.'

'Mind your own affairs, Justine!' she said sharply. 'Besides, Carl Friend can get the money from his own family if he wants to furnish a house for you. Those Friends have made plenty of profit in roof tinning in the past.'

'They won't help any, Mrs. Murdock,' Justine said sadly. 'And Carl and I don't want to have to wait and wait and wait.'

'You don't have to hurry the marriage for any reason, do you?' Dessie asked suspiciously.

Justine looked at her for several moments, her thoughts racing through her mind.

'Not exactly,' she admitted at last.

'Well, then,' Dessie said, turning away, 'in that case, you can afford to wait.'

In turning abruptly she almost walked headlong into Waldo. He had come into the kitchen and was going toward the pantry. After Dessie had stepped out of the way, she watched him go into the pantry and pick up several cans off the shelf. He found an empty coffee can and left, going through the kitchen and out the door without a word being spoken. Dessie watched him leave, wondering what he was about to do. She went to the window and watched as he walked to the toolshed and came out a moment later carrying a spade. With the coffee can in one hand and the spade over his shoulder, he disappeared out of sight behind the barn.

It was not until almost ten minutes had passed that Dessie realized what Waldo was doing behind the barn.

Just as she was opening the door to run out there and observe him from the corner of the barn, Waldo walked into view. He came toward the house, carrying the spade but not the coffee can. Dessie's heart sank. He had buried the can, and the money with it, and she had failed to get out there in time to see where the wealth had been hidden. She walked back into the kitchen and placed breakfast on the table.

Waldo came in a few minutes later, washed his hands at the pump, and sat down at his place. He began eating as though nothing out of the ordinary had taken place out behind the barn. Neither she nor Waldo had anything to say to each other during the whole twenty minutes they were at the table. When he finished eating, he got up and put on his hat.

'Have some affairs to attend to in the village,' he said shortly. 'Will be away for the forenoon, the whole of it.'

Dessie nodded. She had to grip her hands tightly in

order to hide her impatience. She waited until Waldo had got out of sight, and then she grabbed Justine by the arm and pulled her through the door. Pushing Justine ahead, Dessie ran as fast as she could to the toolshed, where she quickly snatched up two spades, and then hurried toward the back of the barn.

She set Justine to digging right away, while she looked the ground over carefully, hoping to find evidence of a freshly covered hole. She searched for nearly half an hour without finding a single trace of the hole she was positive Waldo had dug, and after that she went to work, digging methodically.

After several hours, Justine slumped to the ground completely exhausted. Dessie was tired, too, and the blisters on her hands made digging so painful that she could hardly bear to hold the spade. But she forced herself to keep on, allowing Justine to rest a few minutes.

'Get up and dig, Justine,' she called breathlessly, not being able to bear seeing her idle any longer.

Justine crawled to her feet and tried to push the blade of her spade into the stony earth. She wanted to beg Dessie to let her rest some more, but when she glanced up and saw Dessie's closely clamped lips, she knew it would be useless to ask.

Dessie stopped for a moment to ease her back. When her eyes were raised from the ground, she saw Fred Paxton leaning over the stone wall beside the road a hundred feet away.

'Going fishing, Dessie?' he called. 'See you're digging fishing worms.'

Dessie thrust her hand against the small of her aching back and straightened up a little more.

'Thought I might,' she said slowly. 'It's been a long time since I went.'

'Now that you and Waldo have all that money to falute on,' Fred said. 'I guess you and him can afford to spend all your time doing nothing but fish, if you have a mind to.'

'Maybe,' she said, tightening her lips.

The mere mention of the money inflamed her thoughts until she could not see clearly. She bent over the spade, thrusting the blade into the rough, stony ground with all her might. She kept doggedly at it until she was certain Fred had walked out of sight over the hill.

Later she sent Justine to the kitchen for some bread and potatoes left over from breakfast, and when Justine returned, Dessie sat down in the shade of the barn and ate hurriedly.

'While I was in the house, Mr. Murdock phoned and said he wouldn't be back in the forenoon,' Justine said. 'He told me to tell you he would be away in the afternoon, too, the whole of it.'

Dessie leaped to her feet.

'Why didn't you tell me right away when you came back a minute ago?' she said angrily.

Justine glanced at the stony ground.

'We're not going to dig out here the whole afternoon, too, are we, Mrs. Murdock?' she inquired pleadingly. 'My hands are raw with blisters, and——'

'Never mind that,' Dessie said firmly. 'We are going to dig this afternoon, the whole of it!'

'But Mrs. Murdock——'

'Shut up, Justine, and do as you are told!'

When Dessie fell on the bed at dusk that evening, she had never before in all her life felt so thoroughly miserable. Not only had she spent the entire day digging in the stony ground behind the barn, but, moreover, she had not been able to find the coffee can. Her back felt as if she would never be able to use it again.

Once upon the bed, she moved her body carefully, easing herself into a prone position. Justine had gone out earlier in the evening with Carl Friend, and Waldo still had not returned. Dessie felt so tired and lonely that she wanted to cry. Just as she felt tears coming into her eyes, the phone began to ring. She lay motionless, listening to it ring for several minutes, hoping all the while that it would stop so she could begin crying.

The phone did not stop, and it sounded as if it never would as long as she lived. She got to her feet, pressing her hands over her ears in order to keep out the sound, and stumbled painfully to the hall. There she sat down in the chair beside the stand and lifted the receiver.

'Hello,' she said unsteadily.

'Is this Waldo Murdock's wife?' a voice boomed.

'Yes,' she answered, wondering who it could be.

'Then you'd better bestir yourself and fetch Waldo home where he belongs before it's too late. This is Charles Mason. Waldo is over here at my place, in the east part of town, annoying my household, and if he was a Democrat, I'd shoot him myself, instead of turning the job over to his wife. I've never in my life seen a man behave like he's doing. I guess it's public knowledge by now, otherwise I wouldn't be repeating it that sudden wealth has gone to his head, but that's still no excuse for the way he's doing.'

'What's Waldo doing?' Dessie asked, shouting impulsively into the phone.

'He's befuddling Miss Wilson, the schoolteacher who boards at my house, into going away with him. He says he's going to set sail for Australia or somewhere.'

'But he can't do that!' Dessie protested.

'That's what any average, normal, level-minded human being would think, too, but I don't know what's going to

stop Waldo if you don't come and get him right away, because he's already befuddled Miss Wilson into going to Boston with him tonight, and starting out again from there the first thing in the morning. He's got Miss Wilson believing everything he says, the lies along with the common truth. Looks like she would be on her guard, knowing she's associating with a newly-rich, but she's too far gone to listen to reason. Waldo pulls out his wealth every few minutes and waves it in front of her, and the sight of that big roll of greenbacks acts on her just like chloroform would on an average being. I've done my best to——'

Dessie gripped the phone.

'Did you say Waldo has a big roll of money?' she shouted. 'Greenbacks tied with a string around the middle?'

'He surely has, Mrs. Murdock. It's the biggest roll of money I've seen on a man since the Democrats took over.'

Dessie, who had risen from the chair until she was almost erect, sat down, hard.

'Let him be!' she said coldly. 'I don't want part or parcel of him. He had me digging in stony ground all day looking for that money in a coffee can, and it wasn't there at all. Let the schoolteacher take him. I've had my share, and more, of suffering, and now I'd be comforted to see somebody else have a goodly portion of it. Sudden wealth will show up a man's true nature every time, and I'm glad I found out the true size and shape of Waldo Murdock's nature before I wasted another single day of my life on him.'

'You mean you're not going to try to stop Waldo from going away to the other end of the world with Miss Wilson?'

'No!' Dessie said emphatically. 'Waldo Murdock has a free hand from now on!'

She hung up the receiver. A moment later she slumped brokenly in the chair. She called Justine several times before remembering that Justine had gone out with Carl Friend.

After that she hurried into her clothes and went back to the phone. She rang up Thornton Blanchard, her lawyer, and told him to come right away. He lived only a few miles distant, and he promised to be there within fifteen minutes.

While waiting for Thornton Blanchard, Dessie paced up and down the hallway, her face grim and determined. Her mind was made up, and she knew the sooner she acted the better she would feel.

After a few more minutes, he drove up to the house and stopped his car in the dooryard. Dessie went to the step, holding the door open for him. Thornton Blanchard hurried inside and went directly to the table in the centre of the living-room.

'Is there something wrong, Mrs. Murdock?' he asked anxiously.

'There is now, but it won't be much longer,' she said, sitting down at the table, 'not after I set things right I should have attended to twenty years ago.'

Blanchard sat down and opened his briefcase, slipping out a pad of ruled yellow writing paper and a pencil. He watched Dessie's face, waiting for her to begin.

'Are you ready?' she asked.

'Yes, Mrs. Murdock,' he told her, adjusting the pad on the table.

'I want a divorce,' she said quickly, 'and I want it in a hurry. How soon can I get it, or do I have to go find myself a better lawyer?'

Blanchard sat up.

'Joking aside, Mrs. Murdock, right after you and your

husband inherited all that wealth, you want a divorce?' he asked unbelievingly.

'That's what I said.'

'But why?'

'Never mind my reasons,' she answered. 'When I go to the store and ask for a pound of sugar, I don't have to tell the clerk my reasons for wanting it, do I?'

'No, but——'

'Then go ahead and get me my divorce.'

Blanchard fingered the writing-pad nervously. After several moments he shook himself, and glanced across the table at Dessie.

'Have you any grounds, Mrs. Murdock?' he inquired cautiously.

'Of course, I've got grounds. I've got all the grounds needed and a plentiful supply to spare.'

'What are to be the grounds on which the suit is to be based, Mrs. Murdock?' he asked, bending over the pad and gripping the pencil tightly.

'Cussedness,' she said, leaning back.

Blanchard looked up.

'That's what I said,' she nodded. 'Cussedness!'

'The judge that hears this suit might not——'

'I don't care what the judge thinks,' she retorted. 'It's my divorce, and I'll have grounds of my own choosing whether the judge likes them or not.'

Blanchard tapped the pencil on the table several times, his mind deep in thought.

'As your attorney, Mrs. Murdock,' he said finally, 'would you mind telling me in confidence on just what grounds you do base your contention?'

'Waldo Murdock tricked me,' she said angrily, relieved to have an opportunity to talk about her troubles. 'He went and made as if to bury the inheritance in a coffee can

behind the barn, but didn't, and then went off and stayed from home all day while I broke my back, and Justine's, too, digging in stony ground for it.'

Blanchard drew the palm of his right hand slowly over his face. He leaned back after that and gazed professionally at the ceiling. He was doing his best to keep from saying, on the spur of the moment, anything of a rash nature.

'And I want alimony, too,' Dessie spoke up. 'I want all of it.'

Blanchard sat up.

'What do you mean by all of it?'

'All the inheritance, of course,' she replied.

Blanchard was silent for some time. He looked at the pad, studying the texture of the paper minutely. After a while he looked up at Dessie, fortifying himself with several deep breaths.

'It's going to be difficult, if not impossible,' he said gravely. 'Downright difficult, Mrs. Murdock.'

'That's your job,' Dessie told him. 'I've worked hard for my living, too.'

Blanchard expelled the breath from his lungs and took a fresh start.

'For one thing, Mrs. Murdock, we have no community property law in this state.' He leaned back, rolling the pencil between the palms of his hands. 'Naturally, that rules out automatically any possibility of a legal division of Waldo's wealth, whatever it may amount to. But let me put it another way. I'll review briefly the background of the whole matter. A wife is subject, more or less, to the will of the husband, all things being equal, of course. However, the marriage contract also subjects the husband to the will of the wife, placing the shoe on the other foot, so to speak. Now we arrive at the conclusion that the two

members of the partnership are each and individually subject to the will of the other. But, and let me speak frankly, in our present society, it is the wife's own responsibility to devise, instate, and employ methods, means, and opportunities for enticement that will cause her spouse to desire of his own free will and accord to bestow, shall we say, a single largess, or, as the case often is, continuing largesses, upon her while united in wedlock. Now, as you no doubt realize, Mrs. Murdock, the average wife, to put it bluntly, by showering her favours upon her spouse obtains, in most instances, a bountiful portion of his goods, chattels, and wealth, in some cases benefits that, judged by worldly standards, are far out of proportion to the value——'

'No!' Dessie said emphatically.

Blanchard cleared his throat and bit his underlip.

'It might be best, in the long run, to let the presiding judge set the sum you might obtain from your present husband,' he said wearily. 'I'm afraid I won't be of much help in that connection. However, I can proceed with filing the divorce papers, and the matter of alimony can be taken up in due course.'

'When can I see the judge about getting the money?' Dessie asked. 'Tomorrow morning?'

'I'm afraid not,' he said, shaking his head. 'Your suit couldn't possibly come up for trial until the next term of court, come autumn.'

'Come autumn!' Dessie cried.

Blanchard nodded.

'You mean wait all that time!' she cried excitedly. 'Why, Waldo Murdock will have every penny of the wealth spent long before then. There wouldn't be anything left for me to sue for!'

'Well,' Blanchard said, shaking his head, 'I don't know

what can be done, then. The terms of court are set by statute.'

The side door burst open, and they both turned round to find Waldo standing in the doorway blinking his eyes in the bright light. After adjusting his vision, he walked into the room and went to the vacant chair between Dessie and Blanchard.

'How be you, Thornton?' Waldo said, reaching out and grasping Blanchard's hand. He shook it hard.

'Fair,' Blanchard said uneasily. He glanced at Dessie. She was staring at Waldo. 'Fair,' he said again.

Waldo seated himself.

'Thought for a while today I needed to see you about a matter, but I changed my mind. There's no need, now.'

'Well, I'm glad you handled the matter without needing any help.' Blanchard said, stumbling over the words.

'Decided not to bother handling it,' Waldo said, 'so I just dropped it.'

'That's fine,' Blanchard said, wondering.

Waldo made himself comfortable.

'Was trying to figure out a way to have a good time and keep the money, too. Figured it couldn't be done. So I decided to get shed of it.'

Dessie was about to leap from her chair when Waldo reached into his pants pocket and tossed the big roll of greenbacks across the table to her. The tightly bound roll of money tumbled into her lap.

For a moment Dessie looked as if she did not know what in the world had happened. Then slowly her eyes began to bulge and she looked down into her lap. She stared at the money dazedly.

'Waldo——' she said, her speech choked.

Tears began to flow down her cheeks, and Waldo squirmed uneasily in his chair. He dropped his head,

glancing up at her from beneath his eyebrows every now and then.

'Waldo——' she began again. She could not continue.

Waldo wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

'Figured a man with no more sense than I've got ought not to be allowed to possess that much wealth,' he said, still looking down. 'So I decided there was only one thing to do and that was to get shed of it.' He glanced from Dessie to Blanchard. 'It makes me feel better to be shed of it, the whole three hundred and fifty dollars of it.'

Her chair falling over backward as she jumped to her feet, Dessie ran to Waldo. She dropped on her knees beside him and threw her arms around him.

'Waldo—that schoolteacher——'

'The mind was weaker than the eye,' he said, glancing up at Blanchard. 'The mind was weaker than the eye until she said she wanted me to give her the money to carry.'

He looked down admiringly at Dessie.

'Waldo,' she said haltingly. 'I needed that exercise out behind the barn.' She looked up into his face. 'It did me a lot of good.'

Blanchard pushed back his chair as quietly as possible, gathering up his pad and pencil as he backed away from the table. He had almost reached the door when he was startled to hear somebody singing in the kitchen. He stopped and listened, and by that time Dessie had heard it, too. She raised her head and listened intently. It was Justine singing at the top of her voice. She had never sung like that before, not even during the day.

Dessie got up and went to the kitchen door. She threw it open and stood back.

'Come in here, Justine,' she called into the next room.

Justine walked slowly past her and went as far as the table. She stood trembling, fearing she was going to be

scolded for singing in such a loud voice at that time of night.

Dessie followed her to the table.

'What did you tell me this morning about not having cause to hurry marriage with Carl Friend, Justine?' she asked her.

Justine gripped her fingers tightly.

'That's what I said this morning, Mrs. Murdock,' she replied after hesitating to answer for several moments. She glanced quickly around the room at Waldo and Blanchard. 'But——'

Dessie nodded.

'You can't fool me when I hear such singing as I hear a minute ago, Justine,' she said. 'I think it would be a good thing if you and Carl Friend went ahead right away and bought that chamber suite you were speaking to me about this morning.'

She handed Justine the roll of bills and walked around the table to the chair where Waldo sat. Justine looked at the greenbacks in her hand, gripping them tightly before she could bring herself to believe they were real.

'Thank you, Mrs. Murdock!' she said, tears beginning to trickle down her cheeks. 'How did you know?'

'Never mind, Justine,' Dessie said quickly.

Justine began backing toward the kitchen doorway.

'That money never was intended for us in the first place,' Waldo said. 'We couldn't have managed it, even if we had had a smart lawyer to help.'

Dessie dropped on her knees beside Waldo, throwing her arms around him again. They both turned and looked toward the door where Blanchard was standing. Without a word he turned, opened the door quickly, and stepped out into the night.